THE SPIDER

MASTER of MEN!

A POPULAR PUBLICATION

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PIRATES FROM HELL!

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by GRANT STOCKBRIDGE

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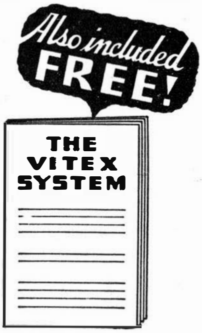

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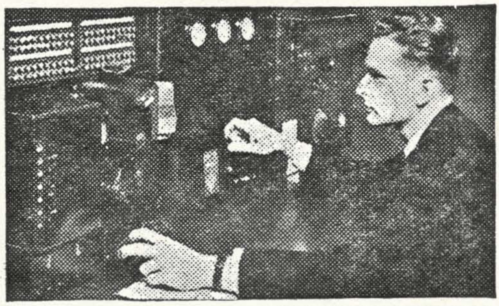

Learning Radio at Home Nights Has Gotten Hundreds Good Jobs

Yes, hundreds of men from all walks of life are in pleasant, well-paying Radio jobs today because they trained at home to be Radio Technicians. These men hold jobs in practically every branch of Radio—installing, fixing, selling home and auto Radio sets; operating and maintaining Broadcast, Police, Aviation, Commercial, Experimental Radio Stations; selling, installing and servicing loudspeaker systems. Newer fields such as Television, Commercial Electronic Devices offer opportunities now and for the future to Radio Technicians.

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Anyone can tune a Radio set, but very few can service one; few can operate or maintain a Broadcast Station, or handle the many other types of jobs which require a working knowledge of Radio. That's why so many trained Radio Technicians enjoy good pay, steady work, plenty of opportunities for advancement. And why there are many opportunities to make as much as $5 to $10 extra a week fixing Radios in spare time while training.

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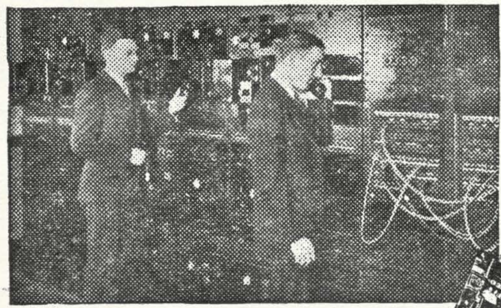
J. E. Smith, President
National Radio Institute, Dept. OHS9
Washington, D. C.



Top Picture

FIXING RADIO SETS in spare time pays many from $5 to $10 a week extra while learning. Full time work for Radio dealers, jobbers or manufacturers, servicing home and auto Radios, pays as much as $30, $40, $50 a week. Many Radio Technicians operate their own spare time and full time Radio Service businesses.

Center Picture

BROADCASTING STATIONS employ Radio Technicians as engineers, operators and pay well for trained men to fill interesting technical jobs with real futures.

Lower Picture

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THE SPIDER

MASTER OF MEN!

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Volume Twenty-One August, 1940 Number Three

PIRATES FROM HELL

Book-Length *Spider* Novel

By Grant Stockbridge 6

The grisly hordes of LaFitte, modern counterpart of ancient, blood-thirsty piracy, swept across the United States, crippling our great railroad systems, leaving twisted wreckage and horrible, scorched corpses of innocent men and women . . . paralyzing an entire continent with fear! How could Dick Wentworth, alone, crush this brutal Blitzkrieg of Crime!

MURDER'S ONE-MAN SHOW

A Thrill-Packed Ed Race Novelette

By Emile C. Tepperman 92

What master of infamy, save the devil, could have painted that picture of doom? A cop looked at it and died! Because of it a lovely debutante turned thief! And Ed Race, the Masked Marksman, found himself in a murder frame that defied the most accurate shooting of his deadly guns!

—AND—

TROJAN HORSE OF CRIME ......The Editor 4

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STORY ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOHN FLEMING GOULD

THIS SEAL PROTECTS YOU AGAINST REPRINT FICTION!

Published every month by Popular Publications, Inc., 2256 Grove Street, Chicago, Illinois. Editorial and executive offices, 205 East Forty-second Street, New York City. Harry Steeger, President and Secretary. Harold S. Goldsmith, Vice President and Treasurer. Entered as second-class matter September 5, 1933, at the post office at Chicago, Ill., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Title registration pending at U. S. Patent Office. Copyrighted, 1940, by Popular Publications, Inc. All rights reserved under Pan American Copyright Convention. Single copy price 10c. Yearly subscription in U. S. A. $1.20. **Subscription Department, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y.** For advertising rates address Sam J. Perry, 205 E. 42nd St., New York, N. Y. When submitting manuscripts kindly enclose self-addressed envelope for their return if found unavailable, and send to Editorial Department, 205 East 42nd Street, New York City, N. Y. The publishers cannot accept responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts, although all care will be exercised in handling them. Printed in U. S. A.

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Trojan Horse of Crime

THE world is tottering on the brink of destruction. Europe's monuments of civilization, culture and enlightenment have already become little more than shattered stepping stones leading back to the dismal ages from which mankind has valorously struggled. Must other continents catch this fever of doom? Are we, in this broad land we love, to participate in the collapse of a civilization some hundreds of years old? Perhaps it is decreed; perhaps we are approaching the end of the cycle, when society as we know it must crumble and become as dead as Babylonian civilization, or Persian or Greek or Roman. Perhaps our plan of living has been weighed by the Supreme Judge—and found wanting. Yet whatever is in the cards for us, we cannot give up the ghost without a grim struggle. We would rather die than submit to terms which can only lead us to such barbarism as modern man can scarce conceive.

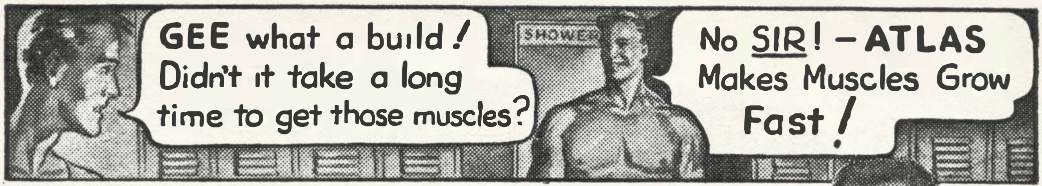
America has never lost a war, and it is doubtfull that she ever will. But when next we fight, there will be elements to which we are thoroughly unaccustomed: we will be battling unseen forces, first—a termite type of enemy. A gnawing, undermining menace which perhaps has already weakened the very structure of our democracy. We refer, of course, to the menace of the Trojan Horse—the insidious Fifth Column. The watchword of the day, ever on the tongues of our statesmen in Washington, ever on the editorial pages of the nation's newspapers, is: Beware of the Fifth Column! Heaven knows there is great justification for this sentiment. The rains will be long washing the crimson evidence from European fields.

We are not of the alarmist school which believes the United States will soon be attacked by foreign invaders, nor is it our purpose to analyze international military strategem. We are concerned particularly with the undermining effect of Fifth Column activities, and the opportunities such subversive tactics provide for the Underworld of crime! Once the enamel of a tooth is weakened, decay sets in rapidly —any dentist will tell you that. And in the same fashion, when a man's moral fibre is weak to begin with, he is an easy victim for emissaries who seek his support.

The men behind the Fifth Column do not attempt to sway the morally strong or intelligent. They realize fully that low mentalities are most easily influenced. They realize that there is an appalling number of criminals in this country, and they know that the average mentality of typical lawbreakers is extremely low. Therefore, it is obvious that a Fifth Column operating in this country would find thousands of possible followers. It is only a short step from safe-cracking to sabotage. A man who will commit a murder for a few dollars is an ideal candidate for the job of destroying a munitions plant or a ship yard. A woman who will sell marihuana cigarettes to high school kids would quite readily circulate poisonous gossip—or even poisonous candy. A bunch of people whose policy, already, is to exact a living from society without working, needs little pursuading to help prepare the country for what promises to be rich looting. They make ideal Fifth Column material.

Grant Stockbridge, who each month brings us a new *Spider* novel, is not only a student of human nature, but also a scholar and historian. The world today is his text-book, and from his acute observations, he has drawn a Crime-and-Fifth-Column background for his next novel—*Master of the Night-Demons*. The story gives what we feel is a shockingly realistic picture of what could happen here—if we don't watch out!

The Editors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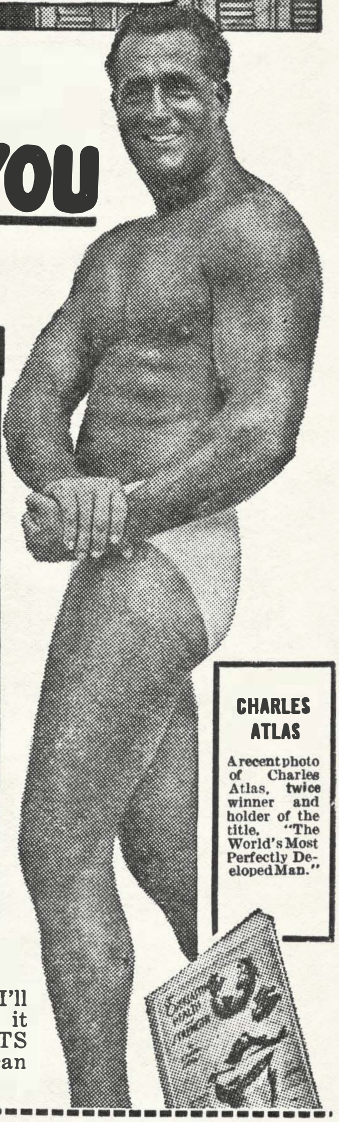

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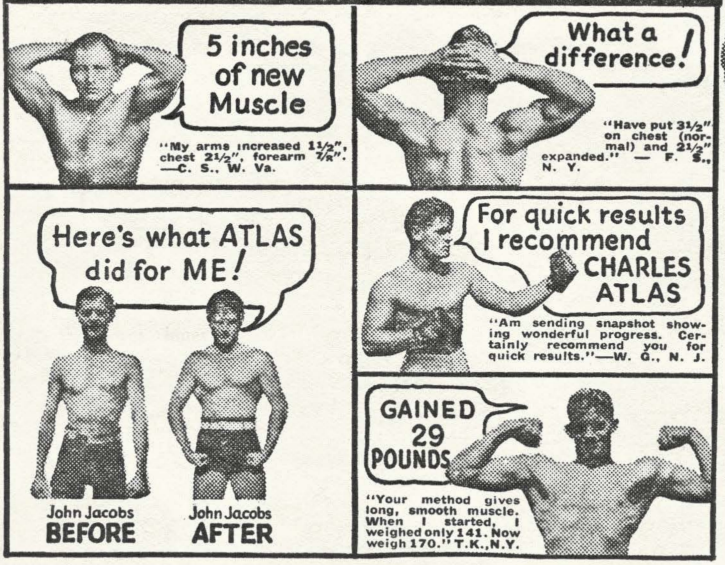
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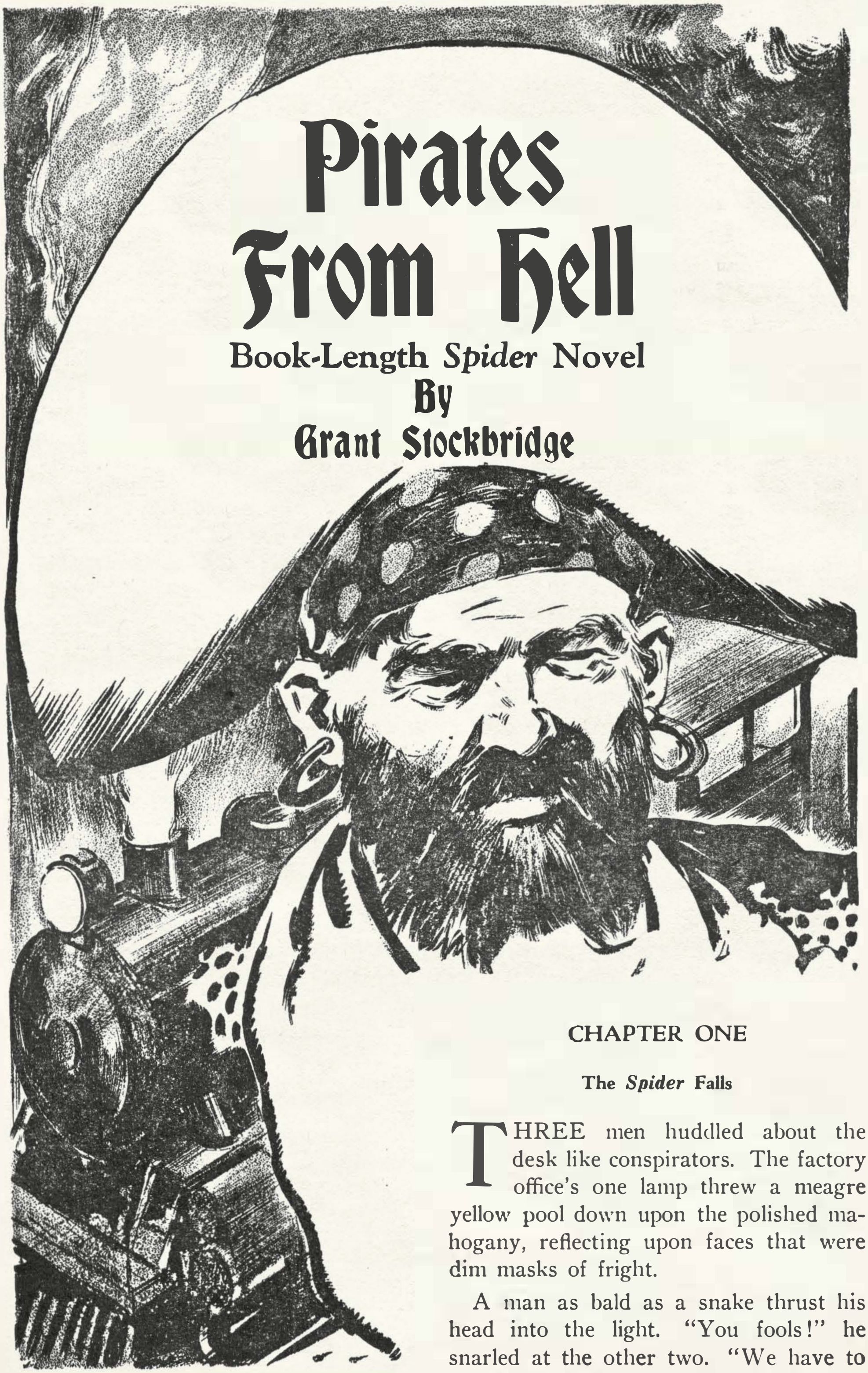
Pirates From Hell

Book-Length *Spider* Novel

By

Grant Stockbridge

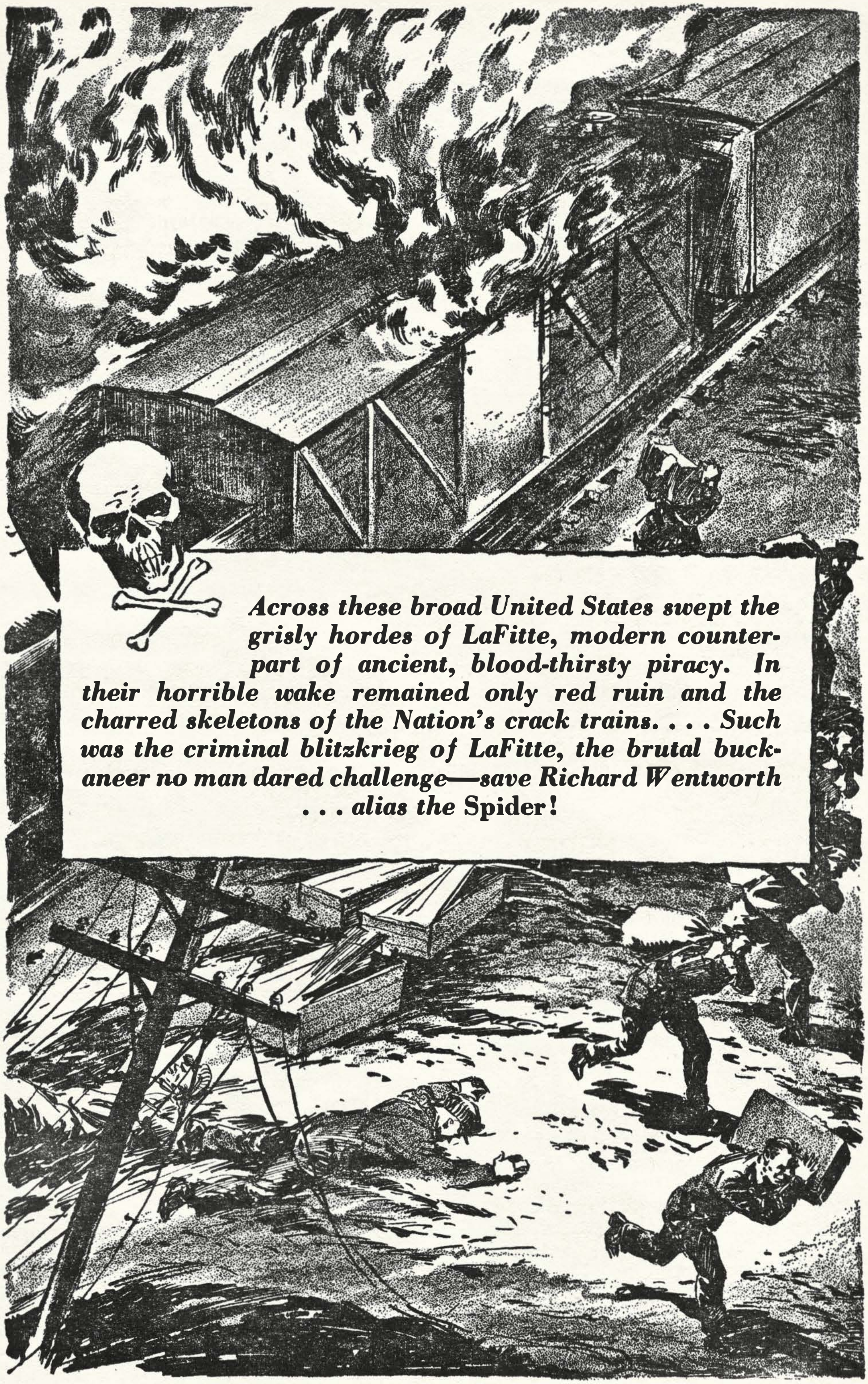


CHAPTER ONE

The *Spider* Falls

THREE men huddled about the desk like conspirators. The factory office's one lamp threw a meagre yellow pool down upon the polished mahogany, reflecting upon faces that were dim masks of fright.

A man as bald as a snake thrust his head into the light. "You fools!" he snarled at the other two. "We have to



Across these broad United States swept the grisly hordes of LaFitte, modern counterpart of ancient, blood-thirsty piracy. In their horrible wake remained only red ruin and the charred skeletons of the Nation's crack trains. . . . Such was the criminal blitzkrieg of LaFitte, the brutal buccaneer no man dared challenge—save Richard Wentworth . . . alias the Spider!

do what LaFitte demands! Or rot in a federal prison!"

The man who answered him was massive as a safe. His iron-grey hair bristled. "You're right, Carlyle," he snapped, his voice harsh with anger. "I was a fool . . . to trust you! You have made me a traitor to my country!"

Carlyle threw back his bald head mockingly. "You pocketed your share of the profits, Hartford!" he jeered. "You can't complain!"

Off to Carlyle's left, the door of the closet, unseen in the eerie darkness, slowly swung open. Eyes as passionless as God's Judgment peered out at those three men who, glaring angrily at each other, did not notice.

Hartford lifted his heavy, square body by bracing his hands on the desk. His face was mottled. "And now, Carlyle," he said slowly, "you tell me that we are threatened with exposure by this LaFitte!"

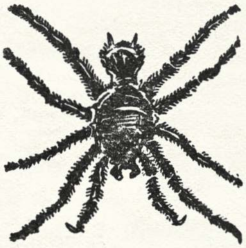
Carlyle was still mocking. "It's extortion, of course. But what can we do? All LaFitte has to do is to tell the government what he knows! We must obey him!"

Carlyle glared at his two companions. For the moment, neither answered him; their lips did not move — and yet a ghostly, mocking laughter whispered suddenly in that dark room! It was an ominous sound, that laughter. Without mirth, it was flat, metallic . . . and menacing. A whisper like the voice of Death itself!

The three men crouched there, frozen with terror . . . and the voice that had laughed was speaking!

"Do not fear, gentlemen," it whispered, mocking, "that LaFitte will expose you! The government already knows! *I* told the officials! You may rest assured of that!"

"That's a lie!" Carlyle cried hoarsely. "Who the hell are you?"



There was no vocal answer, but out of the darkness to Carlyle's left, something white flickered into view beneath the light. The men flinched back fearfully. A chair crashed to the floor. On the desk, there was a slight imperative tap as the white object settled itself . . . and was revealed as a neat oblong of vellum such as business men use for calling cards. It bore no name.

It bore, in blood red ink, a menacing symbol of hairy legs and poison fangs—*a spider!*

Carlyle whispered a violent and vicious oath. *"The Spider is in this room!"*

A gun glinted suddenly in his fist, but there was cold fear in the slow hunching of his shoulders. All the world knew the *Spider,* knew the swift and lethal justice he meted out to criminals. And these three men had done more than violate the law. They had betrayed their country!

From the darkness, the *Spider* dropped words as hard and cold as bullets. "I came to destroy you three," he said softly, "because, contrary to government orders, you have been selling the army's secret aviation instruments to warring foreign powers!"

Carlyle's gun hand slipped beneath the desk, twisted slowly. He had spotted the *Spider* now. The voice came from his left! The *Spider* spoke again and Carlyle trembled suddenly. This time the voice came from his right!

"There is a slight chance," the *Spider* said ,"that your punishment may be commuted. If you talk freely—*about LaFitte!"*

Carlyle gripped the gun hard, started it turning slowly in the new direction. It had to be slowly, lest the *Spider* detect the movement and fire first!

IT WAS Hartford who answered the *Spider*. His iron-grey brows fairly bristled with anger. "I'll do better than that," he snapped. "*Spider,* I'll pay you to catch this LaFitte! He's blackmailing us! He has demanded that we ship him our entire present supply of the instruments! A half million dollars worth! God knows who is hiring him!"

"Where are you sending the shipment, Hartford?"

Carlyle gathered himself, clenched the gun desperately . . . and discovered he didn't know from what point the *Spider* had spoken this time. He couldn't be *sure!* His left hand trembled as he wiped sweat away from his upper lip.

Hartford shook his big head. "We aren't sending it!"

"On the contrary," the *Spider's* voice was soft, directly behind Carlyle, "on the contrary, the shipment left here this afternoon, dispatched by Carlyle—No, Carlyle, I really can't allow you to commit suicide!"

From immediately behind Carlyle, a gloved hand reached out of the dark. It seemed merely to rest upon the bald man's shoulder, but he flinched with pain. The gun clattered loudly to the floor.

"Yes, suicide, Carlyle," the *Spider's* voice ran on softly. "For it would be suicide to try to shoot me. You know that now, don't you, Carlyle!"

Hartford had retreated a half pace. Of the other man, only his trembling hands were visible. He spoke for the first time. "Hartford," he said. "Carlyle had to do it. LaFitte would have talked. He had no way of knowing the *Spider* would talk first."

Hartford rasped, "You're both cowards, you, Melville, and this rat, Carlyle. I'll fight!"

"You will surrender," the *Spider* said quietly. The gloved hand tilted the bowl of the bronze lamp on the desk and the pool of light widened. Its edge crept up Carlyle's lank body and for an instant half-revealed the figure behind him. The *Spider* stood wrapped in a long black cape. Beneath the broad brim of his hat his eyes were like the swift thrust of a honed rapier.

"I have already summoned the police." he said softly. "You will surrender yourselves to them. Hartford, Melville, march to the door."

Carlyle cried out frantically, "Stay with me! He's lying! He doesn't dare call the police! They'd shoot him on sight for the murderer he is!"

The *Spider* repeated, "*March!*"

Hartford took a slow step backward. seized Melville by the arm. The two retreated toward the door. Carlyle writhed under the *Spider's* grip.

"One last question, Carlyle," he said. "Where did you send the shipment of instruments to LaFitte?"

Carlyle quavered. "Just to LaFitte. San Francisco. That's all I know. I swear to God, it is. Oh, please, *Spider*. . ."

The *Spider* thrust Carlyle from him, and the man stumbled to his knees, leaped up frantically to race after Hartford and Melville. They already held the door open, but it admitted no fresh light.

Under the cover of that disturbance, the cape-wrapped *Spider's* figure faded backward across the room toward the windows. He moved carefully to one side so that he should not be outlined against the lighter grey of the outdoors. Abruptly, his head twisted about. He heard a slight sound outside there, the crunch of a foot upon a graveled drive. Was it possible the police had arrived already?

THE *Spider* made a long pantherish leap toward the window, and at the same instant he saw a small dark object arch upward toward the window. Even as he spotted it, the glass shivered into a thousand fragments! A sharp curse sprang to the *Spider's* lips. He whirled on his toes, leaping backward. The flying object thudded on the floor.

"Bomb!" cried the *Spider.*

The three men were still crowded there into the doorway, struggling to escape.

The bomb let go.

There was no roaring concussion, no ear-shattering blast. The shell of the bomb split apart, and a tower of blue-white fire leaped upward. It made an angry crackling like a string of miniature firecrackers.

That was all . . . but the three men at the doorway pitched unconscious to the floor while the blue-white fire still threw its ghostly illumination over the office!

Only the *Spider* was still on his feet. His black cape whipped straight out from his shoulders as if in a titanic storm. It was tattered and rent in an instant. He was picked up bodily and jammed against the wall. His head thudded violently. Still, he did not collapse.

There was another name which the Underworld had given the *Spider* . . . the Master of Men. It was the will of this Master of Men that kept him on his feet while three ordinary men, twice as far from the blast, had fallen instantly!

He staggered. He clawed the wall. He fell to his knees . . . and still he moved on. The police were on the way and Carlyle had spoken truly. The police wanted the *Spider* for a hundred kills, a hundred executions performed in the cause of justice. That was not all. The bomb had not been thrown by the police. They possessed no such mysterious weapon as that flaming bomb! Criminals then . . . and the Underworld, hated the *Spider* even more viciously than the police. Criminals on the way to this spot. . .

The *Spider* gathered himself together and, with the last flickering fire of his will, he hurled his fainting body violently toward the open closet. His shoulder struck the door facing. He spun, fell backward. His trailing hand caught the edge of the door. It wavered slowly shut. . . .

Inside the closet was no movement, and the door moved slowly, slowly. Finally, it stopped with a soundless jar. It was not quite closed. The latch did not click. That was because it wedged on something that sprawled across the threshhold, a piece of cloth. A triangle of black cloth lay exposed outside the closet.

It was a corner of the *Spider's* cape!

In all the office there was no sound now; no movement. Even the will of the Master of Men had yielded finally to the mysterious force of that bomb!

IT WAS a few seconds later that, in a distant part of this great factory, a man cried out hoarsely. The cry echoed through the corridors and it was harsh with fright. A revolver cracked sharply. After a pause, there was another shot. It was muffled, as if the muzzle had been close to the target.

Presently, leisurely footfalls made themselves heard along the corridor, and two men sauntered into sight. They came carelessly along the corridor toward the office, and one of them was stuffing two cartridges into the chamber of his revolver.

"Short of cutting off a guy's head," he said, with satisfaction, "there ain't but one way to make sure a guy's dead. You gotta blow out his brains."

The leader grunted, "You like to blow out a guy's brains, Racine."

Racine laughed and twirled the gun by its trigger guard. "Well, there's that," he agreed. "The guy was a watchman. What the hell?"

They stood over the three unconscious men in the doorway. "The big guy looks like this Hartford what LaFitte said we was to kidnap," the leader said and stooped to search the unconscious Hartford's pockets. "Yeah, this is him!"

The other man grinned as he stooped

and started to truss up Hartford's feet. "Big guys don't fall no faster," he laughed. "But they make a bigger smear when they hit!

He finished tying Hartford's feet, stared down at the other two men. He spun his revolver.

"Damn you, Racine!" the leader snarled. "Put that gun away! LaFitte said we was to leave the other two alive!"

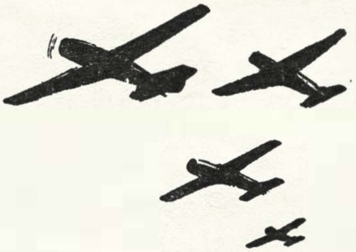
Racine shrugged elaborately. He stooped to Hartford's feet, and they carried him along the corridor. They vanished around the corner and presently even the echo of their feet died. Outside the building, an automobile engine started up and pulsed away into the night.

In the hallway, the two unconscious men did not stir. On the floor of the office closet, the *Spider* lay motionless, and the corner of his cape was visible under the door. . . . Dimly, a police siren began to whine. It grew louder rapidly, and another siren picked it up, and another and another.

In a space of minutes, the police cars were rocketing into the fenced enclosure about the factory. Men in blue bounded toward the buildings. It was Inspector Littlejohn, sworn enemy of the *Spider,* who found Carlyle and Melville still unconscious in the office. It was Inspector Littlejohn who found on the office desk—the seal of the *Spider!*

Littlejohn made no sound, but his eyes were like hot blue fires as they swept over the office. Muscles worked over the bones of his dour, long face—and he spotted the black triangle of the *Spider's* cape, still projecting beneath the closet door!

He snapped his fingers to attract the police guard at the door, beckoned him close. "Six men at once!' he whispered. "Pass the word, quietly, that the *Spider . . .is in that closet!"*



The cop gasped, reached the door in two long bounds and went racing down the corridor. Inspector Littlejohn drew a heavy revolver and methodically checked its loading by feel. His eyes never left the triangle of black cloth that he knew must be the *Spider's* cape.

The cloth did not move. There was no sound save Littlejohn's own breathing. It whistled through his thin, arched nostrils. He held the gun ready and, within minutes, the six men came silently into the room. With a gesture, he aligned them, guns in hand . . . waiting.

"Flashlights, all of you," he whispered.

The police drew out their hand torches, focused their beams on the door. Littlejohn glanced about him. He had taken every precaution. The *Spider* could not put out the lights with a quick shot as long as so many flashlights operated. The window? But this was three stories above the earth. He drew in a slow breath, and flame glittered in his blue eyes.

"If I shoot," he whispered, "all of you open fire. Now, Muldoon, you open that door—and open it *fast!"*

The cop called Muldoon nodded crisply. His eyes strained wide as he sidled along the wall, and reached across the door to grasp the knob. His fingers closed upon it; his shoulders set. He sprang violently aside, and wrenched the door wide open.

"Don't move, *Spider!"* Littlejohn snapped, "or you're a dead man!"

THE *Spider* did not move. Under the assault of those five flashlight beams, he lay inertly upon the floor of the closet. His tattered cape was furled about him. His felt hat had fallen from his head. In that beating brilliance of light, his stern face was boldly shadowed. There was blood on his forehead.

Littlejohn swore in a whisper. Excitement put a rasp into his voice.

"Muldoon," he muttered. "Crawl up from the side. Get hold of his feet and haul him out!"

The cop's face was drawn and pale. He hesitated, his eyes pleadingly on Littlejohn's face. This man in the closet was the *Spider!* So many men had been found dead with that red seal on their foreheads! Littlejohn gestured imperatively, his eyes never wavering from the *Spider*.

Muldoon furtively crossed himself and dropped down to his knees. He wriggled, flat on his belly, to a place where he could just reach the tip of the cape. He clutched it and wriggled to one side. He got his feet under him . . . and heaved!

The *Spider's* head rolled, an arm slithered limply . . . and he began to slide along the floor, out of the office. Muldoon's forehead was dappled with perspiration. He put his back into the job and, with a single violent heave, yanked the *Spider* clear of the closet. Muldoon fell over backward. He yelped, leaped to his feet with a gun clenched in his hand. The *Spider* lay where he had dragged him, unmoving. But no one laughed at Muldoon.

Littlejohn said, "Is he dead?"

Muldoon shook his head. "Hell, I don't know. And I ain't going to find out!"

Littlejohn moved a slow step forward, then another. He kicked the *Spider's* foot. It jiggled a little. He reached down cautiously and groped for the pulse in the back of the ankle. His eyes and his gun remained rigidly upon the *Spider's* face.

That was a mistake. It was the *Spider's* foot that moved.

Without preliminary tensing of his muscles, the *Spider* kicked upward with that foot. It caught the tense gun-wrist of Inspector Littlejohn. The revolver blasted, deafeningly, but its lead roared above the *Spider's* head, stabbed into the darkness of the closet. The *Spider's* foot set solidly against Littlejohn's chest and . . . the *Spider* hurled the inspector bodily backward into the arms of two of his men!

In the same instant, the *Spider* sprang to his feet!

His eyes ranged swiftly over the room. Two of the police had gone down with Littlejohn. Muldoon still squatted against the wall. But the other three men were scattering, revolvers in hand, ready to shoot the instant they had a clear target.

For a split-second the *Spider* stood motionless before the closet. His tattered cape still swirled from the violence of his attack, his long black hair was swept back heroically from his blood-stained forehead.

"Block the door!" Littlejohn gasped while he pitched toward the floor. "Shoot him down!"

The *Spider* heard . . . and he flung back his head and laughed, mockingly. He spun on his heel, took two long bounds—and leaped head-first out the third-story window!

CHAPTER TWO

The Black Flag

FOR a stunned moment after the *Spider's* suicidal leap, the police stood frozen in the office. Inspector Littlejohn fought free of the two men who had fallen with him, scrambled to his feet.

"Stop him!" he shouted. "Shoot him!" He stared about him, dazed. "Where is he! Damn you, if you've let the *Spider* escape. . ."

It was Muldoon, still crouched against the wall, who managed to speak. He stretched out a shaking hand toward the window.

"He jumped. Headfirst" Muldoon gasped. "He must have killed himself!"

Littlejohn leaped toward the window, gun glinting in his fist. He stared down at the gravel drive below. Nothing there. He peered upward and the twinkle of the stars mocked him. There was no movement, no human fugitive in sight.

The *Spider* had vanished!

Suddenly, Littlejohn flinched back from the window. He flung up an arm defensively as if he had been struck in the face. Then he stared blankly out into the darkness. He ripped out a savage oath . . . for he saw the thing that had flicked him in the face.

It was a dangling noose of slim, silken rope!

"The *Spider's* Web!" Littlejohn rasped. He sprang back to the window and peered out. His voice was shaken, almost plaintive when he spoke again. "How in the hell could anybody guess he had that damned Web fastened to the roof? He must have come in with it and left it dangling there for his escape. When he jumped—hell, he just swung to another window!"

Littlejohn whipped about. Muldoon, and you others! Get along this hall! Search every office!"

He sprang to the window, fired three shots into the darkness. His voice lifted hoarsely, shouting orders.

"Close the gates!" he cried. "Don't let anybody leave the grounds! The *Spider* is inside!"

From the shadows near the gatehouse, a man answered his cry.

"Okay, Inspector!" he acknowledged, then bawled at the two guards placed at the gate.

"Go close the side gates!" he shouted at the two men. "I'll keep watch here!"

The two cops were trained to obey, and the man's voice held the ring of authority. They split and raced along the fence. When they were out of sight, the man who had shouted orders strolled out of the shadows beside the gatehouse. He closed the gates and padlocked them, from the outside. He strolled on then, and the outer darkness swallowed him.

A tattered cape swung jauntily from his shoulders!

It was the *Spider!*

A HALF mile away, a powerful Daimler limousine was parked in a narrow woods lane. Beside it crouched a bearded Hindu. His head was wrapped in a turban, and his powerful hand was knotted on the hilt of a long-bladed knife that was tucked into his sash. His eyes stabbed fiercely into the darkness of the woods.

Suddenly, he straightened and his hand left the knife. He lifted cupped palms to his brow in a low salaam as a figure in a tattered cape stepped from the shadows.

"I heard no signal, *sahib,*" the Hindu rumbled. "Therefore, I remained on guard."

"It is well, Ram Singh," the figure in the cape replied. "And Jackson?"

"Jackson, *sahib,* followed thy orders!" Ram Singh said. "If anyone leaves the factory before the police arrive, Jackson will follow them. Those were the orders, master. It was done! But, master, there is blood on thy forehead!"

"Only a scratch," the *Spider* told his comrade quietly. "When you reach the highway, turn *toward* the factory. The highways will be closed for any person attempting to get away from this area. But I think they will not mind if someone drives *into* their trap!" He leaped into the rear of the limousine. "Afterward, Ram Singh, we will have to move fast. These men whom Jackson followed were undoubtedly the agents of this mysterious LaFitte . . . and they kidnaped Randolph Hartford!"

It was only a few minutes later that the limousine rolled to a halt where a police cordon was thrown across the factory road. A sergeant bounded forward, gun in hand. Before he reached the car, the door of the rear opened. A light flashed on in the interior.

The man who leaned forward to smile a greeting at the sergeant bore no resemblance at all to the stern and menacing *Spider.* He was obviously a wealthy gentleman out for a drive. His dress was faultless; gloved hands rested easily on the gold head of his cane. There was humor about the generous mouth.

"Ah, Sergeant Fitz!" he cried lightly. "I heard the sirens coming this way a while ago and thought it might be jolly to drop in on the commissioner!"

A broad smile curved Sergeant Fitz's long lips. "Sure, it's Mr. Wentworth!" he cried. "For all of me, Mr. Wentworth, you could go right in. But truth is, Commissioner Kirkpatrick ain't here."

"How disappointing," Wentworth murmured.

"Yes, sir, Sergeant Fitz's grin widened. "Inspector Littlejohn is in charge!"

Wentworth lifted his smooth brows, laughed. "Thank you, Sergeant," he said. "You're quite right . . . Inspector Littlejohn would not care to have me drop in on him. But you won't forget to tell the inspector that I tried to break in through his cordon, will you, sergeant?"

"That I won't, Mr. Wentworth!" Fitz cried. "Here, Carmichael. Jump in with Mr. Wentworth and see that he gets out through the cordons all right."

So Wentworth, who in secret was the hunted *Spider,* rode out through the cordon under police escort! He was completely relaxed against the cushions, but a hard tension rode through him. If Jackson lost the trail, if the *Spider* failed to arrive in time . . . then Hartford was doomed!

Hartford could be extremely useful to the *Spider* in his work against LaFitte. Wentworth fully believed in his anger against Carlyle. The man had not known of Carlyle's earlier treacheries. Wentworth's mind flicked back to that mysterious bomb which had exploded in the office. Some form of prisoned electrical charge, it seemed. Its effects had been instantaneous—and devastating. LaFitte was behind it, without a doubt!

Wentworth's eyes narrowed at the thought. It was ridiculous to think that LaFitte would accept shipment of the instruments in San Francisco. He would have some other way of collecting the half million dollars worth of material . . . which he could sell only to warring nations abroad!

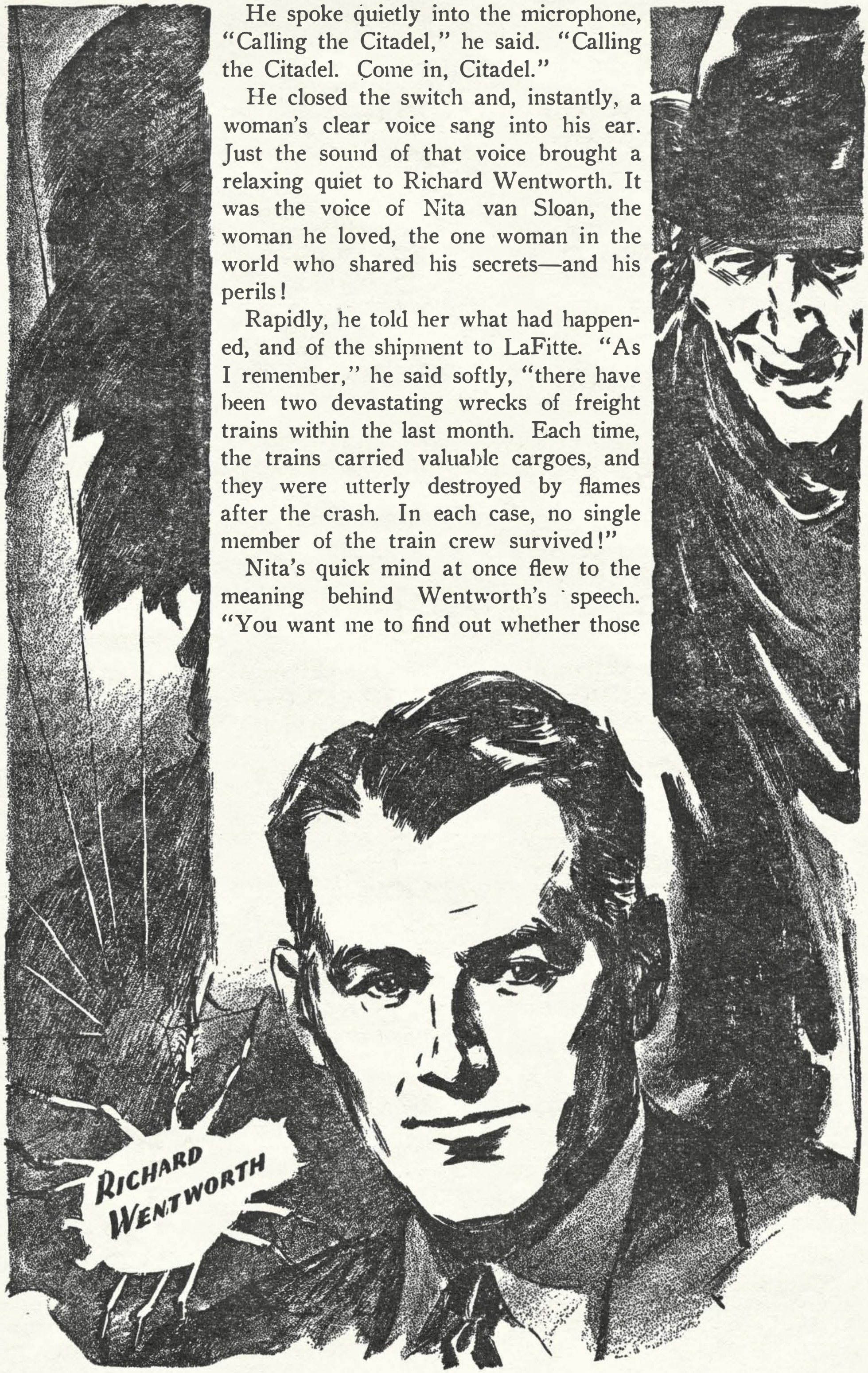
AS SOON as he left behind Carmichael and the last police cordon, Wentworth threw on the switch of his two-way radio. It was of the same type that was used in transoceanic telephony. There were devices for reversing the oscillations of the wave impulses so that only an instrument with the correct realignment of those oscillations could make any sense at all out of the jumbled sounds which would result.

He spoke quietly into the microphone, "Calling the Citadel," he said. "Calling the Citadel. Come in, Citadel."

He closed the switch and, instantly, a woman's clear voice sang into his ear. Just the sound of that voice brought a relaxing quiet to Richard Wentworth. It was the voice of Nita van Sloan, the woman he loved, the one woman in the world who shared his secrets—and his perils!

Rapidly, he told her what had happened, and of the shipment to LaFitte. "As I remember," he said softly, "there have been two devastating wrecks of freight trains within the last month. Each time, the trains carried valuable cargoes, and they were utterly destroyed by flames after the crash. In each case, no single member of the train crew survived!"

Nita's quick mind at once flew to the meaning behind Wentworth's speech. "You want me to find out whether those



trains carried potential war supplies assigned to LaFitte!"

"Exactly, my dear!" Wentworth cried. "If they did, the reason for their destruction is clear! LaFitte was collecting these shipments—and destroying all trace and all witnesses to his theft!"

"Anything else, Dick?" Nita's quiet query was a plea. If only he would come home now, for the present at least he would be safe from danger! But her voice was without hope, too. If there was work, the *Spider* could never rest! Not while the people he loved and served were in danger!

Wentworth answered her gently. "Jackson is following the kidnapers of LaFitte. He is using that new continuous broadcaster I installed in the car. I'll use my direction-finding loop in this car, you employ yours, and we'll set up a triangulation to locate him—and the criminals! Listen for a repeated H in Morse, on the new wave-length that you know. I'll call again in a few minutes."

Wentworth leaned forward to press a button on the radio panel. Afterward, he could twist the dial beyond its normal tuning range. Immediately, he heard a low, musical note repeated again and again. He reached up to the ceiling light, turned the ground-glass dome slowly. As he twisted it, adjusting the loop antenna, the musical note came in more and more strongly. Fixing it at maximum, he flashed on the ceiling light briefly . . . and took the reading on the compass it concealed!

He frowned at that, drew out a panel on which a map of New York was affixed, and laid a rule along the radio sight he had taken. Nita's information as to her compass reading, supplied a few moments later, made the thing almost fantastic.

The criminals, carrying with them a foredoomed kidnaped man, were heading for the busiest intersection of streets in the world, the very heart of New York's Broadway—Times Square itself!

"Faster, Ram Singh!" Wentworth called crisply. "They can have only one purpose in taking Hartford to Times Square! They are going to kill him so that all the world will know about it!"

The great motor under the hood began to roar with power. The wind whistled hoarsely about the Daimler. For long minutes, Wentworth sat tensely . . . then he reached out to manipulate the mechanism that made all the windows opaque. Afterward, he opened a secret wardrobe and, once more, donned the garb of the *Spider!*

Once more he caught up the radio microphone and this time sent out his call for Jackson. It was long moments before there was any answer, then the voice of his comrade-at-arms came to him dimly.

"Parked on Forty-second Street, half block from Broadway," Jackson reported. "Pursued car just ahead. One man in it. Other three dropped out somewhere in Broadway district when I lost sight of car for a few moments. Awaiting orders, sir."

WENTWORTH thought swiftly. It was possible that the parked car was awaiting the return of the other three, but it was more likely that it was a decoy to immobilize the pursuit. He flicked open the switch.

"Capture the man," Wentworth snapped. "Await me where you are."

Jackson's voiced acknowledgement was as placid as if Wentworth had ordered him to drive through the park. "Yes, sir," he said. Then . . . "*Wait!*" he cried. "Wait, sir! You know that strip of moving lights that spells out words around the Times Building? The one they use for news flashes? It just spelled out these words, sir: *A message from the Spider to the people of New York!*"

Wentworth swore softly, did not interrupt. "Faster, Ram Singh!" he called. "I must be at Times Square within five minutes!"

The Daimler seemed to gather itself and leap forward. Jackson's voice came to Wentworth faintly above the rush of the wind, the howl of the motor.

"The message continues," Jackson said. *"At precisely nine-thiry-three o'clock tonight, a famous criminal will walk the plank from the roof of this building. . . . He is a murderer and a traitor to his country, so I have sentenced him to die."* Jackson's voice broke off with an oath.

"Major! Major," he cried. "The message is signed . . . *'The Spider!'* "

Wentworth's disguised lips drew out, thin and cold, against his teeth. "My orders stand, Jackson," he said. "Carry on!"

Wentworth closed the circuit and once more the dribble of musical notes sounded clearly in his ears. He glanced swiftly at his watch. Nine-thirty, exactly. In three minutes, the killers would . . . murder Hartford! No question as to what they planned. This LaFitte was risking no future disobedience from those he sought to command! The horror of Hartford's death, when he was hurled downward from the roof of the Times Building, into crowded Broadway, was intended to make sure of that!

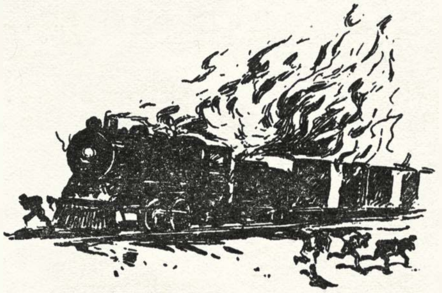
For an instant, Wentworth frowned over two facts that screamed for attention: The message had said that Hartford would "walk the plank"—and LaFitte was the name that had been borne by a nineteenth century pirate!

Abruptly, a voice interrupted the musical flow of signals. "Citadel calling," it came, in Nita's beloved voice. "Citadel calling. The big blue dog phoned. The rabbit must come out of his hole. The little dog is yapping."

Wentworth swore harshly. Nita meant that Commissioner Kirkpatrick of the police was demanding Wentworth's immediate presence. And the little dog? . . . Wentworth's lips curved in a harsh smile. That would be Inspector Littlejohn! Well, let him yap! There was work to be done, work for the *Spider!* No danger to Richard Wentworth could swerve him from that!

The Daimler slowed on the Westside Highway, swooped down the ramp toward the street level below. Ram Singh's broad shoulders rocked easily with the motions of the wheel. He slammed through traffic, wriggled through impossible openings. One minute to go!

Wentworth lifted his hands to the holstered automatics beneath his arms, nodded to himself. "Beyond Broadway," Wentworth said rapidly, "you will find Jackson with a prisoner. Take that prisoner to the Citadel. Put him in the cell. Return, openly, with Miss Nita and watch for my signal!"



For an instant, Ram Singh twisted about his bearded face. His dark eyes registered protest. *"Wah, sahib!* My master goeth into battle—and leaves his warrior behind!"

Wentworth smiled. "There will be plenty of time for you to battle, my blood-thirsty one!" he said.

His words were cut off by the shriek of sirens. A police radio car slashed around the corner ahead and rocketed toward Times Square. As if that had been a signal, the air was suddenly filled with the scream of sirens. From every direction, police cars raced toward the tall three-sided prism of the Times Building.

Wentworth swore softly. Already, they were surrounding the triangular building! Impossible now for the *Spider* to gain open entrance! But he must reach the roof—quickly!

THE Daimler checked for an instant in traffic, then roared on . . . but in that brief moment, a figure had glided like a black shadow from the tonneau and gained the sidewalk in a few quick bounds. The darkness of a doorway swallowed him. Ram Singh called a new protest, twisted about to find his master gone. His bearded lips parted in a fleeting smile. *Aie!* The Master had promised! There would be fighting!

It was nine-thirty-three precisely when the *Spider* raced across the last roof toward the canyon of Seventh Avenue. Beyond the balustrade, he could see the white facade of the Times Building. His eyes strained upward. Nothing there, yet. For an instant, as he raced across the roof, Wentworth paused. He seized a length of pipe, fixed upright to the roof to carry a radio aerial. His weight, his high leap, bent the iron pipe slowly over. We wrenched at it savagely, and the pipe snapped off cleanly at its base!

With that in his hands, he sprang to the balustrade!

Five stories below him was the tangled throng of Broadway. Policemen were everywhere, jammed about the doors of the Times Building. Thousands of people filled the sidewalks and the street. Traffic was at a standstill. Around the electric light sign that girdled the Times Building still ran the legend Jackson had repeated over the radiophone.

" . . . a famous criminal will walk the plank from the roof of this building. . . "

But Wentworth's eyes scarcely saw this. He was looking down at the rope that, just at his feet, crossed the balustrade and was anchored about a brick chimney pot. That rope stretched entirely across Seventh Avenue to the Times Building. From it hung a huge political banner, kiting in the mild night breeze.

With no more hesitation than that, the long iron pipe balanced across his body, the *Spider* stepped out upon the rope! He began to run smoothly, surely along the rope—toward the Times Building, which the police already surrounded!

Sixty feet beneath him, the crowd at first did not see him. Their whole attention was focused on the message which ran ceaselessly about the Times Building, on the high edge of the roof. Then a single face turned toward where the *Spider,* black cape kiting backward from his shoulders, ran swiftly along. A single thin shout lifted, a pointing hand. The shout was drowned in a deep sustained roar. The multiple faces of the crowd focused in that brief instant upon the *Spider!*

Wentworth's lips were grimly set. He paid little heed to his feet, to his balance. His superbly co-ordinated body, his carefully trained reflexes took care of that. His whole attention was focused on the windows ahead. He must reach the building before the police could anticipate him!

The roar of the crowd took form now. Separate word sounds reached him. His own name!

"The Spider!" the crowd cried. *"The Sp-i-i-i-der!"*

It was only now that the police at the doors of the Times Building caught the meaning of the cry—and Wentworth was two-thirds of the way across the street. He caught the glint of guns in their hands. Two reports cracked through the roar of many throats, but the bullets came nowhere near him. Then a sergeant pointed upward toward the window he must enter, and more men ran into the building; others toward the roof he had left.

Wentworth laughed softly as he raced

along the rope. It was what he had hoped. They deemed it impossible that he should escape—and they preferred to capture him alive!

Suddenly, a new roar swept the mob. A brilliant flare of blue-white light glimmered from the faces of a thousand windows, reflected downward into the street canyon. It came from the roof of the Times Building!

Wentworth jerked up his head and swore frantically. He was too late!

High up against the brilliant blue-white illumination, a man's figure was silhouetted! It stood upon the end of a plank that jutted out over the balustrade!

Incredulously, Wentworth saw that the man carried a flag, attached to a short staff. The folds of the flag hung down about his shoulders. There could be no mistaking that massive, broad body. It was Randolph Hartford—doomed!

WENTWORTH checked, balancing easily on the rope, and tried desperately to find a way to save the man. A flash of hope lighted his eyes. If only there was time!

Cradling the iron pipe in an elbow across his body, he snatched out an automatic, and pointed it downward. Twice the heavy gun recoiled against his stiff wrist. The jar set him to swaying wildly upon the rope . . . but the cordage that held the lower corner of the political banner to the building had been cut by his bullets!

Wentworth waited for no more. He glanced up at the doomed Hartford as he raced on toward the building. Guns were popping below him. He heard them, and ignored them. Up there, against the brightly illuminated sky there seemed to be only the one man, visible upon the plank. If there were anyone else, he kept well out of sight. But Hartford was signalling now. The flag in his hand snapped left and right in swift wig-wag. Wentworth caught a few of the letters before he reached the window. *"T-R-A-I-N . . . P-I-R . . ."*

Wentworth shook his head. Train Pirates, the man was wig-wagging. A brave thing to do, in the instant of his death. But it told no more than Wentworth had already guessed, that the two trains which had been destroyed by flames actually were the prey of pirates. Wentworth whipped the iron pipe about, and the glass of the window toward which he ran was smashed. He leaped through the opening, whirled instantly and took a new grip upon the pipe.

It was the work of instants to reach down and fish up the net upon which the political banner was fastened, to drag it up until he could grasp the rope which he had severed with a bullet. If only he were in time!

"I MAKE SURE EACH BOTTLE IS A BIG, BIG ONE"
"I MAKE SURE IT'S WHOLESOME AND GOOD"
PEPSI-COLA
A SPARKLING BEVERAGE
REFRESHING-SATISF
12 OUNCES
PEPSI-COLA
REFRESHING-ENJOYABLE
5¢
12 OZ. BOTTLE

Carrying the rope, Wentworth climbed out upon the ledge beneath the window and began to scramble across the face of the building. High above him, the man still poised against the brilliant sky, wigwagging with the flag. But there could be only seconds left. Even as Wentworth scrambled along the ledge, he saw the man falter in his balance. His arms were flung wide. He arched his back, waved the flag frantically. It was obvious that the board had been jiggled from the roof!

A gasp went up from the street, but Wentworth had no time to look. The rope he grasped was drawing tight. He had reached the second window from the one he had entered. His elbow smashed the pane. He leaped across the sill, jerked the rope through the steam radiator that was beneath it.

A slim hope, but if Hartford had the courage to leap before he was thrust from the plank, he might reach the net. There was a chance that it would hold his plunging body at least enough to break his fall to the street below. If firemen. . . .

Wentworth heard the clangor of fire bells, saw a group of firemen snatch a net from their truck and begin to batter their way through the crowd. A shrill scream lifted from somebody in the crowd, then a hoarse, lifting roar. Wentworth knotted the rope fast, thrust out the window.

Hartford had taken his chance. The flag held high above him, to steady his body upright in its downward course, Hartford was plunging feet-first toward the net Wentworth had spread for him!

The firemen were fighting desperately to get beneath him in time. The crowd seemed paralyzed, white faces straining upward. Wentworth held his breath. His eyes swiftly estimated the man's course. He would strike the net! But would the net hold? It seemed incredible that a man could fall so far in so short a while. Within an instant. . . .

The rope wrenched at the radiator beneath Wentworth's knees. The net sagged, rebounded and shuddered. The long cords jerked, and twanged and quivered. The roar of the mob was stilled and Wentworth was staring, grey-faced, at a spot in the net where the ropes had parted . . . at a hole in the net.

On the ground lay the shattered thing that had been a man. That had been Randolph Hartford. The flag that had fluttered overhead was draped across his crushed body now.

It was a black flag. On it in glistening white, was . . . *a skull and cross-bones!* It was the Jolly Roger—age-old flag of piracy!

CHAPTER THREE

In the Trap

A BLAST of shots snapped the paralysis of horror that gripped Richard Wentworth. Atop a green emergency truck of the police department, a man in blue uniform was crouched. He had a sub-machine gun braced by its stock against his shoulder and he was hunting out the *Spider* with short and deadly bursts!

Wentworth hurled himself backward from the window as a hurricane of lead swept through the space where he had stood a moment before. He bounded to the door and raced along an echoing corridor. He could hear the beat of climbing feet upon the stairways below him, but there was no elevator hum.

Wentworth wasted no time on investigating. If the elevator was not being used by the police, it meant that the criminals on the roof had disabled the mechanism! Wentworth bounded toward the stairway that led upward, and his face was set in grim coldness.

Above him somewhere must be the men who had thrust Hartford to his death. The *Spider* would know how to deal with them! And the *Spider,* even with the police hard on his heels thought not of his own safety—but of the capture of the criminals above him!

Some few precautions he took to delay the police who pursued him. Twice, he fingered into the vertical pockets of a silken girdle he wore about his waist, and drew out metal wedges with reticulated steel teeth in their faces. When a fire door was slammed shut on one of those, it took time and power to force it open again!

And three times, he dropped small capsules of compressed tear gas which exploded to lift a wake of grey strangling fumes in his wake!

But each door he jammed, each miniature bomb he dropped seemed only to make his own ultimate capture more certain!

The Times Building floor area was small, triangular. There was one stairway, one bank of elevators. The building stood off by itself surrounded by the vast empty space of intersecting Broadway, Seventh Avenue and Forty-Second Street!

If Wentworth thought of this fact, he gave no sign. He did not falter in his swift race upward. Finally, gun in hand, he bounded up the final stairs to the kiosk door that led to the roof. He hit the door with his shoulder, plunged out headfirst and struck the graveled roof in a swift, hard roll. When he came up on his feet, guns in his fists, he stared blankly.

The roof was empty!

Frantically, Wentworth's eyes combed the narrow triangle of the roof. He sprang to the balustrade and peered outside. No one was hidden there, and there was no obstacle behind which a man could crouch unseen.

There was a chance that the killers had ducked into offices on one of the upper floors. If they had, they were trapped. There was another, vague chance . . . which would explain why the criminals had used such intense illumination to silhouette the man who walked the plank.

Swiftly, Wentworth ran about the roof. He was crouched far over, eyes combing the gravel. Abruptly, he checked. A cold smile curved his lips, and he stooped to run a gloved finger across a black smear. It was fresh. He sniffed it. *Oil!*

But there was no time to speculate upon that. A glint of metal near the spot where Hartford had been forced to leap to his death caught Wentworth's eye. He ran to it and swore as he stooped to snatch up an antique pistole from the roof. It was an ancient flint lock . . . just such a weapon as a pirate might have carried in LaFitte's day!

Truly, the pirates seemed at some pains to reveal the secret of their activities!

BUT already, he had wasted too much time. He cast another piercing glance about the roof. Even the plank which Hartford had walked to his death was gone. Nothing more here. Nothing save a smear of oil, and an antique gun.

Wentworth thrust the pistol into his cape, but paused a moment before he darted toward the kiosk. The police should be told enough for them to question Carlyle rigorously. There was just a possibility that he knew more about Hart-

ford's death than an honest partner should!

Wentworth bent over the balustrade and, with the nose of a bullet, traced two words on the cement:

"Ask Carlyle!"

Wentworth waited for no more. Below, he could hear the pounding of axes upon the last door he had sealed. The *Spider* darted along the hallway to the elevator shaft. A slender tool of surgical steel from a pocket of the girdle unlocked the door in a trice. He leaned out over space, grasped the central elevator cable, used his foot to slide the door shut again. Then he swung out and clasped the cable with arms and thighs, began a swift, controlled descent.

Now that he knew the pirates had escaped, he could give some thought to his own plight. He could easily pass the pursuers in the building, but it would be another matter to escape the police guards at the doors.

At the seventh floor, at which the cable of the political banner was attached, Wentworth checked his descent and leaned out to get footing on the inner edge of the door facing. He manipulated the latch soundlessly, opened the door narrowly to peer out into the corridor. Opposite him, but facing toward the stairway, gun in hand, stood a sergeant of the police!

Wentworth smiled mockingly. This was perfect!

"Going down!" he called, and slammed open the door.

The sergeant spun about, but before he could jerk his drawn gun into line, the *Spider* had leaped across the corridor! Stiffened fingers drove against nerve-centers in the cop's throat, and he collapsed forward into Wentworth's waiting arms.

Quickly, Wentworth dragged the sergeant to a porter's closet, where he stripped off the uniform. He did not don it, but stuffed the clothing out of sight behind a storage box. Once more he raced along the corridor.

He opened the door of the stairway carefully, and laughed as he presented his gun!

"Just lift your hands, Barnard!" he ordered the policeman who stood there.

The cop had giant shoulders. He whirled with the ease of a trained athlete, but the mocking face of the *Spider,* the leveled gun, held him motionless in his tracks.

"You will come with me, Barnard," Wentworth ordered quietly. "You have an excellent record as an athlete. Tops in the department, aren't you? Yes. I have a feat for you to perform. I think you will find it simple . . . I said, *'Come with me!'* "

Wentworth marched the angry policeman to the office where the ropes of the political banner were attached. "You will walk that rope, hand over hand, to the opposite building," Wentworth ordered. "Your strength is easily equal to the task. Your fellow officers will not shoot at a man in uniform. I shall be here . . . if you look back you will be able to see me . . . and if you make any effort to turn back, I'll start shooting! Understand?"

Barnard said, truculently, "Nothing doing, *Spider!* I don't know what you're trying to do, but. . . ."

His voice faded out. The *Spider* had not spoken, nor moved, but a coldness glittered in his grey-blue eyes. They held inflexibly upon the eyes of the policeman.

Barnard stammered as he started to speak. He turned around and began to climb over the window sill.

Not without reason was the *Spider* known as . . . the Master of Men!

BARNARD had moved a dozen feet before he dared to turn and peer backward. In the dimness of the office, he saw the grimly becaped figure, the silhouette of the black hat. He faced toward the opposite side of the street and moved on, rapidly, hand-over-hand.

He had no way of knowing that the silhouette he saw was merely Wentworth's cape and hat hung on an office coat rack. He could not see the *Spider* racing swiftly down the stairs, nor did the policeman who saw him coming at the third floor recognize him at all.

That was not strange. Wentworth had stripped off a part of the facial disguise of the *Spider*. And with it had gone all the stern, coldness of the *Spider's* demeanor. He seemed a badly frightened man. He wore a porter's cap and a porter's striped coat, taken from the closet where the stripped sergeant lay, and he carried a floor-brush over his shoulder.

"Quick!" Wentworth cried. "Quick, take me to your boss! I saw the *Spider!* I tell you, I saw the *Spider!*"

The policeman ran down the stairs with Wentworth. "Sergeant Reams!" he yelled. "Hey, Sergeant Reams! This porter saw the *Spider!*"

Sergeant Reams bounded across the lobby, seized Wentworth by the shoulder, and shook him.

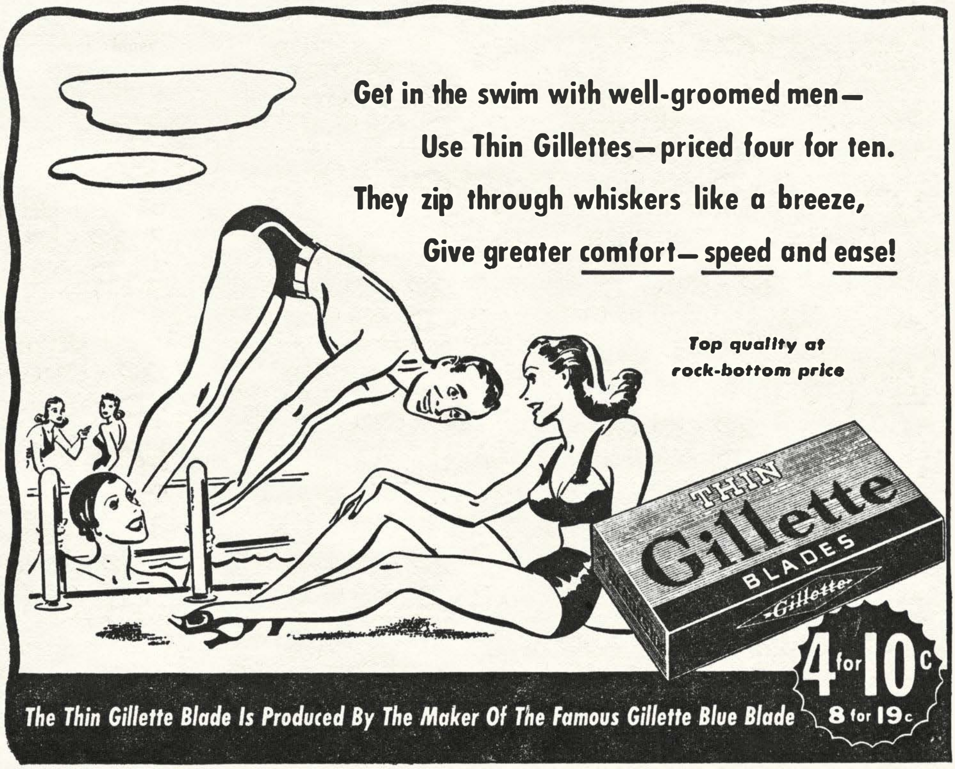
"What did you see?" he demanded harshly. "Where?"

Wentworth stammered. It was his secret of disguise that he could take on completely the character of the man he sought to imitate. Now, he was a frightened porter.

"On the seventh floor!" he gasped. "I saw the *Spider*. He knocked out a policeman and took off his clothes! He dragged him into my closet!"

Sergeant Reams spun and ran toward the outer door and Wentworth followed him, stumbling, bumping other policemen with the floor-brush.

"Commissioner Kirkpatrick!" Reams called. "Commissioner! This porter says he saw the *Spider* take a cop's clothes!"



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Wentworth kept behind the sergeant. He was out of the building now, and he did not want to confront Kirkpatrick face to face. Those shrewd blue eyes of his friend would pierce his disguise in an instant!

Wentworth saw Commissioner Kirkpatrick come striding, long-legged, across the pavement. Wentworth turned and stared stupidly upward toward the banner where the policeman, Barnard, was almost half-way across the street. He heard Kirkpatrick snap out orders.

"Don't let a single man out of the building!" he called. "Not a single cop, even if you would swear to his identity! I'll review the whole force myself. Sergeant Reams. . . ."

Wentworth pointed his broom upward, turned to a cop beside him. "Look, what's that cop doing that for?" he asked. "That cop going along that rope, hand over hand?"

The policeman to whom Wentworth spoke spun about, saw the figure of Barnard on the rope. He let out a yelp. "Hey, Commissioner! Look! On that rope!"

Kirkpatrick whirled about. Orders flew swiftly, and men bolted past Wentworth to carry out those commands. More men rushed across the street to the roof toward which the rope led. Others darted into the Times Building. Wentworth, the porter, was forgotten. Kirkpatrick's saturnine face was sternly drawn. His spiked military mustache bristled with energy.

"Sergeant Reams!" he snapped. "Get firemen to hold a net under that man!"

Reams' voice rang out with the order, and then he came to stand beside the Commissioner. "Seems like a fool thing to do, sir," he said.

KIRKPATRICK was frowning. "He was in a tight place. If that porter hadn't warned us, we might not even have seen him. It's not like it was a half hour ago, with the street jammed with people looking up. He might even take in the cops at the other end."

Sergeant Reams shook his head, "It don't seem possible he can get away this time. What can he do?"

Kirkpatrick's face was drawn in sombre lines. There was no weakening of the determination of his jaw, but behind the sternness of his blue eyes, there was pain. He had long believed that his friend, Richard Wentworth, was the *Spider*. There had never been any conclusive proof. But this time . . . he strained his eyes, trying to make out the identity of that figure crawling its slow way toward the opposite building.

Was it . . . Dick Wentworth?

Kirkpatrick drew in a slow breath. It faltered a little.

"Sergeant Reams, can you . . . identify him?"

Reams was squinting at the figure, too. "Can't say I do, sir," he said. "He's broad in the shoulders, pretty husky I'd say. A big man and powerful."

At his elbow, a voice spoke politely, but with mockery. "A very accurate description, Sergeant. How are you, Kirk?"

Kirkpatrick whipped about as if a knife had stuck him. He glared angrily at the dapper man who stood beside Sergeant Reams, leaning his gloved hands upon the gold head of his cane.

"Mr. Wentworth!" Sergeant Reams stammered.

"Dick!" Kirkpatrick snapped. "Where did you come from?"

Wentworth lifted his brows in a mocking smile. "Come from?" he echoed. "Really, Kirk, where did you think I had come from? Out of the air?"

Kirkpatrick took a sharp stride forward. "Answer me, Dick!"

Wentworth shrugged elaborately, turned about. "You there, officer," he called to a nearby cop. "Where did I come from?"

The cop looked puzzled. "Why, you came from out of the crowd across the street, sir," he said. "I wondered how you got through the lines."

Wentworth bowed his thanks. "Thank you," he murmured. "My car is over there on Forty-second Street, Kirk. Nita is waiting for me. We had an engagement for a late supper, but she told me you had been trying to reach me. I thought I would present myself promptly . . . and the officers of the cordon thought the fact that you wanted to see me was ample reason for letting me through."

Kirkpatrick smothered an oath, swung back toward where the man was finishing his hand-walk along the rope. Wentworth stepped up to his side.

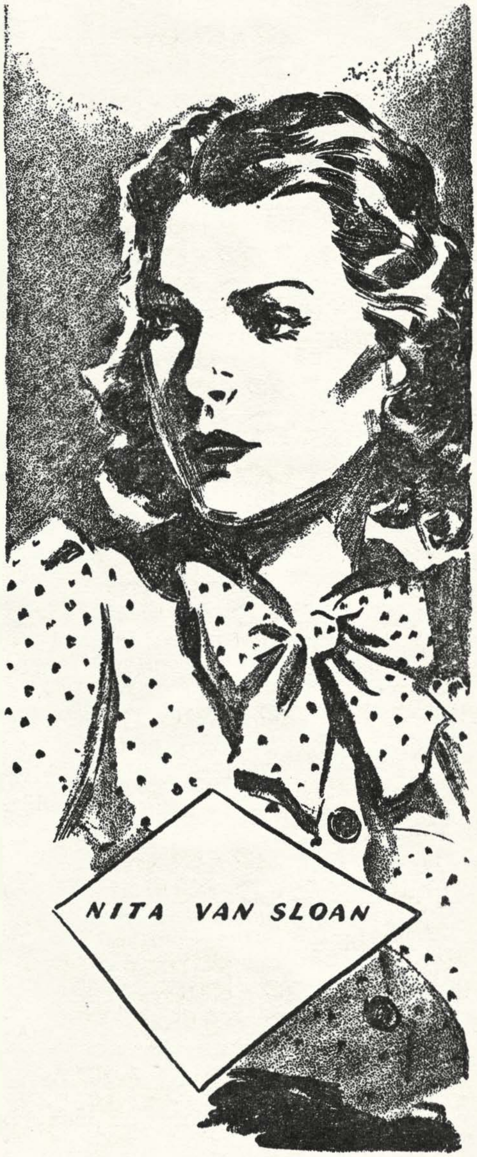
"What's Barnard doing!" he asked. "This seems a curious place and time to demonstrate his athletic ability."

"Barnard!" Kirkpatrick snapped. "By the heavens, it *is* Barnard! Sergeant Reams. . . . *Where's that porter?"*

Sergeant Reams dashed off to search, and another sergeant came bounding out of the Times Building. "We found the cop the *Spider* knocked out. His uniform was gone!" he said rapidly. "We found the *Spider* robes in that office up there. But I don't think that man on the rope is the *Spider*. Looks like Officer Barnard to me, sir."

Kirkpatrick waved the man away and Wentworth nodded and smiled. "One of the oldest tricks in the world, Kirkpatrick," he said easily. "You watch the right hand while I do the trick with the left hand, like all good stage magicians."

"While *you* do it?" Kirkpatrick snapped.



WENTWORTH shrugged. "A figure of speech, Kirk, of course," he said. "The *Spider* made you look for a man in police uniform, gave you a man in uniform to look at—and then slipped away in something entirely different. A neat trick of elementary white magic, Kirk, which is to say—psychology! But you wanted to see me about something, Kirk?"

Through a long moment, Kirkpatrick stared at him, then a smile disturbed the gravity of his strong countenance. He lifted a hand to his moustache.

"Inspector Littlejohn wants some words with you, Dick," Kirkpatrick said slowly.

Wentworth smiled, "I seem to remember having had words with Littlejohn before this." He moved toward the sheet-covered body on the pavement. "Have you identified the victim—" Wentworth broke off with an exclamation. "A curious thing here, Kirk! The complete destruction of the face is understandable, but the fingers! The skin has been stripped from their tips!"

Kirkpatrick said, tightly. "Cover it up, Dick! I've seen some pretty bad deaths, but this . . . yes, we've identified him, as much as possible. Papers and clothing identify him as Randolph Hartford. I'd be better satisfied if the fingertips were not abraded. But he might have snatched at the wall in falling."

Slowly, Wentworth replaced the stained canvas over the body. There was a knife-crease between his brows and whiteness about his mouth. He had noticed another thing which he had not mentioned. On the back of the dead man's head, there was a series of small, brutal wounds. They had not been caused by blows. The twisting of the hair, the burned areas about the wounds showed clearly that a drill had ground into Hartford's skull! The wounds were not deep enough to cause death; nor even unconsciousness unless from pain.

It was torture!

The hard rigidity of Wentworth's anger made his movements jerky as he turned about. His voice came out easily: "Kirk, will you accept my parole to come in on request for those . . . words with Littlejohn?" he asked. "I'd like to keep my engagement with Nita."

Kirkpatrick's eyes were intent. "You've found something that escaped me, Dick!" he said.

Wentworth lifted his shoulders in an angry shrug. "You know that he did not commit suicide; that he was murdered?"

Kirkpatrick said, shortly. "That was obvious enough, though how the killers escaped from the roof, I haven't been able to figure. Even the plank that the man walked was gone."

Wentworth peered up toward the roof. "The porter you were seeking didn't carry it away, I take it?"

"What are you driving at, Dick?"

Wentworth shrugged slightly. "If there were any traces of oil on the roof, Kirk," he said, "I should be inclined to suspect an escape via autogiro. It should be possible with these new machines that make a sixty-foot vertical jump. Take-off would be easier than descent. . . . Yes, I should suspect an autogiro."

He turned back to Kirkpatrick's narrowed eyes. "You know the *Spider* doesn't kill men in this beastly fashion!"

Kirkpatrick's jaw-line was rigid. "You can't expect me to deny the *Spider's* guilt when he was seen here . . . and claimed credit in that news panorama up there!"

At his jerked gesture, Wentworth glanced upward. The lights were still swiftly spelling out the message: *"At exactly nine-thirty-three o'clock tonight, a famous criminal . . ."*

Wentworth said slowly, "No, I could hardly expect that much, Kirk. You have my parole." He turned away, and Kirkpatrick took a single stride after him. He checked then, stood watching the figure of his friend as he strode confidently toward the police lines. The proud carriage of the head, the confidence of those compactly powerful shoulders were a mockery. Kirkpatrick knuckled his mustache.

DICK WENTWORTH . . . *the Spider?* Then, surely, the *Spider* had not committed this crime! And yet . . . Kirkpatrick shook his head. He had known the cold fury of Richard Wentworth when some megalomaniac criminal struck at humanity. If Hartford were such a criminal, then, perhaps, Wentworth might have slain him so!

Wentworth stepped calmly enough into the rear of his limousine, and smiled into the charming face of Nita van Sloan. If there was anxiety in her heart, Nita concealed it well. She was dressed for an evening's outing. The exquisite, heavy drape of her dull blue gown molded her figure subtly. Her smile was gay . . . but her words were completely serious.

"That antique pistol came from a pawnshop not a dozen blocks from here," she said quietly. "There was a price tag shoved down in the barrel and overlooked."

Wentworth nodded, "To this pawnshop, Ram Singh. And if there is a dentist's office nearby, I think I shall have to have some repair work done. A porcelain filling in a front tooth has come loose."

The bearded Sikh behind the wheel rumbled an assent and the Daimler limousine rolled smoothly forward, skirted the police lines and whirled northward.

There was a slight frown between Nita's smoothly symmetrical brows. "What is this foolishness about a dentist, Dick?" she demanded.

Wentworth did not look toward her, and anger smoldered in his grey-blue eyes. "I could be wrong," he said softly, "but an abrasive was used to remove Hartford's fingertips, and from the looks of the back of his head, I think I know where he was tortured."

"Tortured!" Nita gasped.

Wentworth nodded slowly. "Had it ever occurred to you, Nita, that our modern science offers a greater variety of torture instruments than any Spanish inquisition? For instance, a dentist's drill, preferably dull, and applied . . . *to the back of the skull?*"

Nita gasped, and Ram Singh's voice rumbled. "The pawn shop, *sahib,* is a half-block ahead."

Wentworth laughed softly. "And there, almost directly opposite, Nita, is a dentist's office. See the sign, *Open All Night!*"

"But you must have more reason than that for suspecting the place, Dick!" Nita cried.

Wentworth nodded gravely. "We are dealing with modern piracy, Nita," he said. "Piracy of whole trainloads of goods. Such piracy needs an efficient spy system . . . and what better place could there be for headquarters than this all-night dental office? Any type of man or woman could enter and leave at any time without suspicion. Moreover, there is the fact that Jackson lost sight of his quarry for the first time in this general neighborhood. However, I shall first make sure my suspicions are correct. There is no time to question Jackson's prisoner."

Nita said, quickly. "Wait, Dick! You mentioned that Jackson had a prisoner. I'll go and question him, phone you. Where is Jackson?"

Wentworth whipped toward her. "Where is he? Ram Singh, you were to meet Jackson, take his prisoner. . . ."

Ram Singh turned apologetically. "*Wah, sahib!*" he mumbled. "Jackson did not meet me, and I had no wish to make trouble for him by reporting that."

Wentworth checked an oath on his lips. His eyes stared burningly into the night. Jackson had been ordered to wait with his prisoner . . . and the brave, loyal Jackson always obeyed orders!

"No question as to what has happened," Wentworth said, harshly. "The criminals struck first! If Jackson is still alive, he is the prisoner . . . of the pirates who tortured and murdered Hartford!"

Wentworth stared toward the garish lights of the dentist's office and his blue-grey eyes were cold as glacial ice!

CHAPTER FOUR

Torture Therapy

A TORMENTED cry sounded within the dentist's office just as Wentworth reached the door. The cry was muted; it was as faint as if it came from a great distance. But it came from just beyond this door! Wentworth knew the answer to that: the operating room was soundproofed! A cold fist knotted in Wentworth's vitals. It was possible that cry had been wrung from . . . *Jackson!*

It was equally possible that a dental patient had cried out in pain.

Wentworth opened the outside door casually, and strolled toward the reception desk. The nurse was on her feet, halfway to the door, as if she had seen Wentworth's shadow against the ground glass panel and had come to admit him.

"Did you wish to see Dr. Browl?"

Wentworth's eyes swept her face and felt a sharp diminution of his suspicions. The nurse's blue gaze met his candidly. There was sympathy in the curve of her full lips. . . . But the cry sounded once more behind the office walls!

The girl's face went stiff, her eyes blanked out. "Some patients are so nervous," she said, rapidly. "Actually, Dr. Browl is expert in painless therapy."

Wentworth nodded, but his heart thudded hotly in his throat. He was almost certain that he had heard Jackson's voice! It would be the work of a moment to stride across the room, whip open the door. If he were wrong, he could apologize. But if he were right. . . .

Wentworth pressed his left arm down against his side, and felt the hard and comforting bulge of his holstered gun! Yes, he could force his way into the office . . . but even though he found Jackson there he would have learned nothing important. The destruction of this headquarters was not of paramount importance; what the *Spider* wanted was the secret behind the entire, murderous gang's operations!

Wentworth made his decision in that moment. He could stop Jackson's torture by insistence upon immediate treatment himself; he would behave so as to make this Dr. Browl suspicious and offer himself as bait!

Wentworth said shortly, "I'll have to see Dr. Browl at once. A troublesome filling has come out. A nerve must be partially exposed. Also, a young lady is waiting for me in my car to keep an engagement."

The nurse said, placatingly, "If you'll just have a seat. . . ."

"At once!" Wentworth snapped. "Go in and tell Dr. Browl I'll pay him double to take me at once. That poor fellow who yelled won't mind waiting a little while."

The nurse said, hesitantly, "Dr. Browl doesn't like to be interrupted, but . . . I'll see."

She turned toward a darkened office, next to the one which a light showed to be in use. The instant she was out of sight, Wentworth spun toward the front window of the dentist's office. He reached it in two long strides, glanced with obvious furtiveness toward the door through which the nurse had disappeared. Then he drew his handkerchief and waved it up and down slowly. Nita and Ram Singh were not in sight, of course, but to anyone watching him, it would seem that he had made a signal.

When the nurse came back, Wentworth started guiltily and thrust his handkerchief back in his pocket. "Well," he asked sharply. "Will Dr. Browl take me at once?"

The nurse's eyes were puzzled. She shook her head and then, under her desk, a buzzer whirred.

She said, "Pardon me a moment longer, sir."

When she returned, she gestured Wentworth toward the darkened office. "Dr. Browl will be with you in a moment, sir!" she said.

WENTWORTH'S lids were heavy over his eyes as he went into the operating room. A glance confirmed his guess that the place was sound-proofed. The nurse took his hat and cane, gestured him toward the chair. His suspicions were sharpened. If poor, loyal Jackson were beyond that connecting door in the other operating room, he had stopped the torture. Soon he hoped to know more about this Dr. Browl!

As Wentworth fumbled his way into the operating chair, with apparent nervousness, he contrived to palm a hypodermic needle which lay upon a tray beside the chair. He hid it while the nurse fastened a long apron about his neck. When her back was turned, he surreptitiously filled the needle with warm water from the basin beside him . . . and kept it hidden.

Dr. Browl came in briskly, massaging pink hands in a towel. His thin, pointed face thrust forward inquiringly; his eyes lurked behind thick glasses.

"Glad to be able to accommodate you," he said crisply, in a rasping, thick voice. "A loose filling, I believe you said? Open, please. Ah, yes, this tooth, isn't it? Apt to be painful. The cavity is quite deep. But a needle will eliminate that. A shot of novocaine. The novocaine, nurse. No, I'll prepare the needle myself!"

The nurse ducked toward a sterilizing cabinet with a quickness that seemed almost fear. Dr. Browl beamed down on Wentworth, once more massaging his long fingers. There were sparse black hairs on their backs.

"It won't take long, sir," he said smoothly. "And it will be quite painless. I rather fancy my painless therapy."

Wentworth said drily, "How does the man in the next room feel about it? Or were those chortles of joy?"

The dentist's eyes seemed to expand enormously behind the lenses as he bent toward Wentworth. "Just nervous," he said cheerfully. "That's all, just nervous. The needles cause a little pain, of course. Nothing to speak of. Oh, nothing at all to speak of."

He accepted the bottle of novocaine from the nurse, turned toward the tray beside the chair. It may have been accidental that he turned his back entirely upon Wentworth so that the filling of the needle took place out of sight. Wentworth watched the movements of Dr. Browl's elbows. He saw that the dentist set the novocaine upon the tray, and took something from an inside coat pocket. It was after that his elbows were completely still and the cords of his forearm indicated he was filling the needle. A small, secret smile moved Wentworth's lips.

When Dr. Browl placed the bottle of novocaine and the needle side by side upon the tray, turned toward him, Wentworth had his eyes closed, his face puckered up.

"That bright light," he muttered. "I'm afraid . . . I'm going to. . . ."

Wentworth plucked at the apron, jerked upright in the chair and bent violently forward in an explosive sneeze. He jumped to his feet and fumbled for a handkerchief. In that moment of commotion, his apron fluttered erratically . . . and the harmless, water-filled needle in his hand replaced the one upon the tray!*

"I'm so sorry," Wentworth said apologetically. "Strong lights in my eyes always affect me like that. I should have warned you. Now, hurry, please! I told your nurse that I have a . . . friend waiting for me in my car!"

The dentist hesitated, needle in his hand. "Wouldn't you like to ask your friend up here to wait more comfortably?" he asked smoothly.

Wentworth said, "Get on with it, man!"

THE dentist shrugged slightly, inserted the needle in Wentworth's gum and pressed the plunger home. In his hand, Wentworth gripped the hypodermic the dentist had intended to use, and Wentworth's fist was a hard and angry knot. Was it death for him that had lurked in this small barrel of glass? Or merely unconsciousness?

Wentworth said, impatiently, "How long before the novocaine takes effect?"

"Almost immediately," the dentist said soothingly. He was bending over Wentworth, peering into his mouth. "I use my own special variant of novocaine, which is much faster. It also has a general soporific effect. You may feel a trifle sleepy."

He straightened and beamed down upon Wentworth, and it was hard for Wentworth to keep the bitter coldness from his eyes. But he had learned what he sought. He knew now how the drug was supposed to affect him! And the last lingering doubts about the man's guilt had left him. Undoubtedly, Jackson had been tortured in the next office!

The *Spider* calmed his anger and steeled himself to patience. He could learn much more by feigning unconsciousness than by any other means. Vengeance could wait!

Wentworth allowed his eyes to droop. "I do feel . . . damned sleepy," he muttered.

He rubbed his fingers together as if they were numb, closed his eyes tightly, shook his head.

"Damned sleepy," he repeated.

"Don't worry," Dr. Browl bent very close. "Don't worry at all. Just go to sleep. When you wake up—when you wake up, *all your troubles will be over!"*

Wentworth let his head sag limply forward and Dr. Browl straightened with a sharp, harsh bark of laughter!

"Nurse!" he snapped. "I'm afraid the drugs have taken hold too drastically. He may have a weak heart! Hurry down to the street and see if you can locate his friend. Get the person up here at once!"

The nurse gasped and ran from the office and Dr. Browl stood motionless through a long moment until the outer door closed. Then he sprang to the sidewall and brushed aside a framed diploma that hung there. There was an apparent ventilation grill there. He put his mouth close to it.

"I sent the nurse down to bring up a suspect," he said rapidly. "Back her up, if necessary!"

Then Dr. Browl fairly sprang upon Wentworth. He whipped aside the apron, made a rapid search of his pockets, found the automatic beneath his arm; found also a case of Wentworth's calling cards.

******NOTE:* Some of those who have fought the *Spider* have insisted, after bitter experience, that the *Spider* had the faculty of foreseeing what his enemies would do. When I asked Wentworth point-blank about this apparent fact, he seemed a little puzzled. "Nonsense," he told me, "no man may *foresee* the future, but he may *deduce!* I was convinced the dentist was guilty. Naturally, he was suspicious over my behavior, would want to overpower me. What simpler method could a dentist use than a needle full of drugs? I merely took normal precautions."**

Dr. Browl rasped out a harsh oath, and stood very still.

"Richard Wentworth!" he cried. "Good God, if he's on our trail. . . ."

Presently, Wentworth heard the clatter of instruments on the tray and opened his eyes narrowly. He knew now that his suspicions were correct to the extent that Browl was up to some sort of criminal operations. So far, Wentworth's ruse was working. . . .

Browl's hands moved with feverish activity over his tray, and Wentworth saw that he was preparing another needle! He masked the needle in a towel and moved toward the outer door. Wentworth choked down the oath that sprang to his throat.

Browl was going to inject Nita with the drug!

FOR an instant, Wentworth was on the point of hurling himself to the attack. He forced himself to be quiet. It was quite apparent that the drug was only a soporific. Nita would not be seriously harmed . . . and if he attacked now, he would lose the opportunity he had gained to eavesdrop while he was supposed to be unconscious.

Unless Dr. Browl himself were the leader of the pirates, he would have to communicate with headquarters. Wentworth wanted to hear that communication!

Seconds later, he heard Nita's full voice lifted sharply, heard Dr. Browl direct her toward the office. She came in and, under lowered lids, Wentworth saw a gun concealed in her fist!

Wentworth waited until she was close to him, and then he fluttered one eyelid. To Nita, that hint at a wink would be sufficient. She would understand what to do.

"Revive him this instant!" Nita cried. "Why aren't you doing anything to bring him around? I demand—oh! What are you doing? A needle. . . ."

There was the brief sound of a struggle, but it did not last long. The nurse's voice lifted sharply. "Dr. Browl! In heaven's name, what are you doing?"

Browl's voice was flat, cold as death. "Shut up, you fool!" he said, "or I'll use another needle on you . . . and you won't recover from the effects!"

The girl gasped and did not speak again. Wentworth heard Browl order her coldly into the office, then heard the impact of a blow. His eyes opened part way and his own frigid glance bored into the dentist's back. He was crouched over the unconscious nurse. Nita had been eased into a chair and sat there limply. . . . The *Spider* schooled himself to patience. Only a short while longer, and there would be a vengeance for this abuse of innocent women!

As if Browl felt the bitter assault of the *Spider's* gaze, he whipped about suddenly. And Browl's face was pale.

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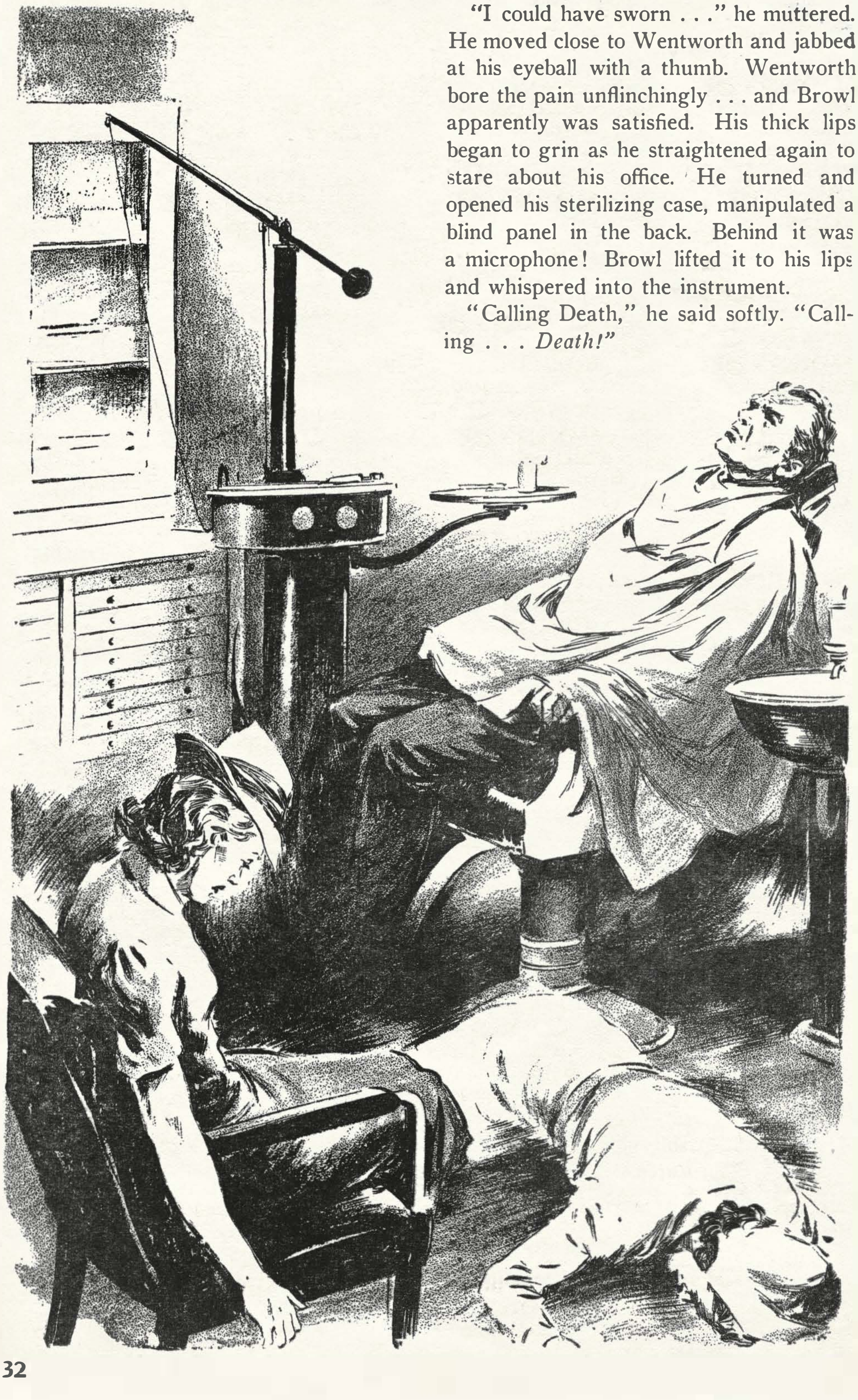
"I could have sworn . . ." he muttered. He moved close to Wentworth and jabbed at his eyeball with a thumb. Wentworth bore the pain unflinchingly . . . and Browl apparently was satisfied. His thick lips began to grin as he straightened again to stare about his office. He turned and opened his sterilizing case, manipulated a blind panel in the back. Behind it was a microphone! Browl lifted it to his lips and whispered into the instrument.

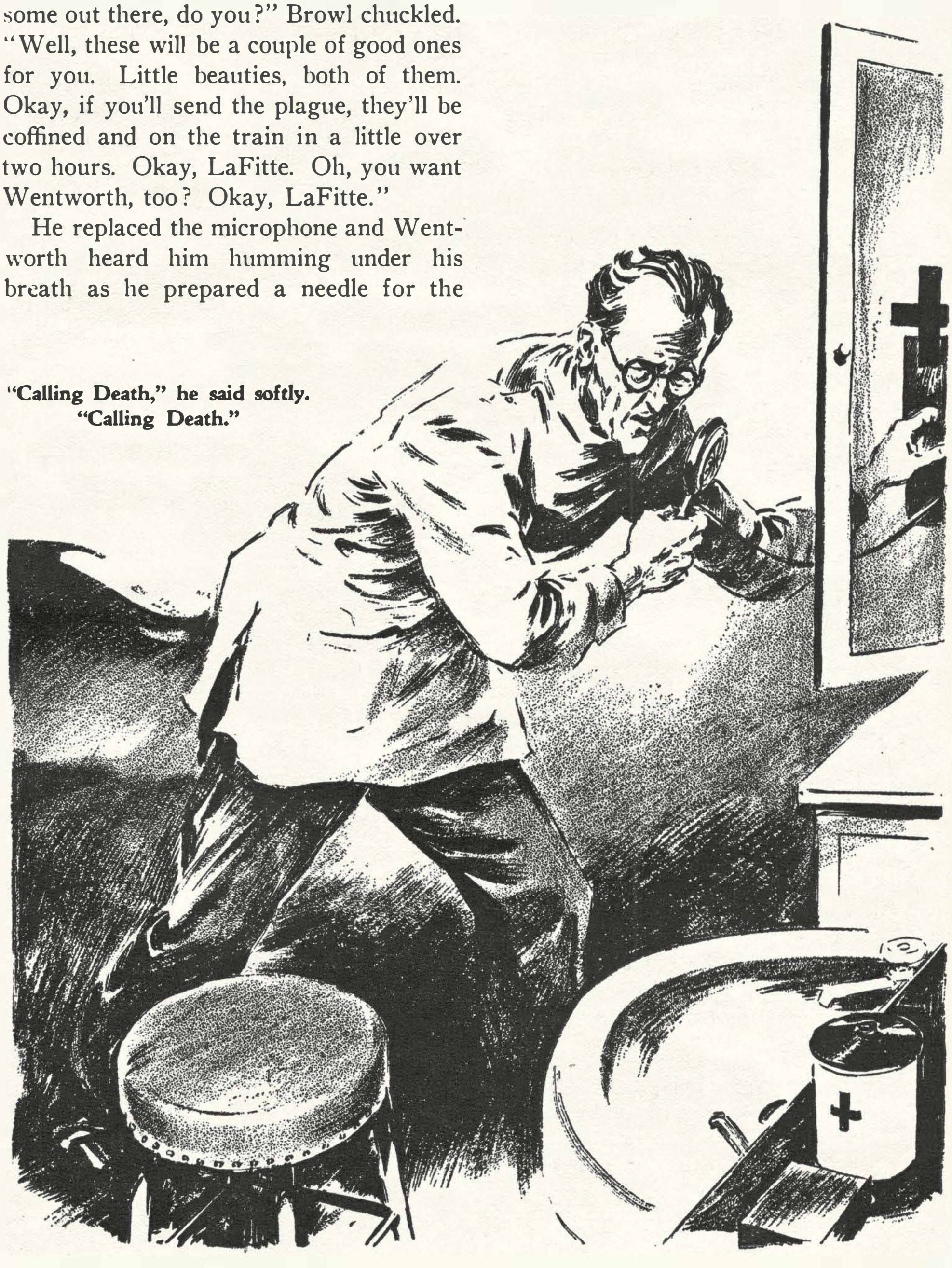
"Calling Death," he said softly. "Calling . . . *Death!"*



Apparently he got his answer, for almost immediately he began to tell about his captures.

"The man's Richard Wentworth," he said rapidly. "Got another guy who works for him—Jackson. The woman is Nita van Sloan. Also, the nurse is wise and I'll have to get rid of her. Oh, you need some out there, do you?" Browl chuckled. "Well, these will be a couple of good ones for you. Little beauties, both of them. Okay, if you'll send the plague, they'll be coffined and on the train in a little over two hours. Okay, LaFitte. Oh, you want Wentworth, too? Okay, LaFitte."

He replaced the microphone and Wentworth heard him humming under his breath as he prepared a needle for the nurse. Wentworth's eyes were burning beneath lowered lids. He longed to crush this criminal who hid behind the mask of an honorable profession, but he could not. He need only remain in his assumed coma a while longer, and he would learn more of the pirate secrets; he would be shipped "out there" to the pirate headquarters.



"Calling Death," he said softly. "Calling Death."

Once there, the *Spider* would know what to do!

YES, it was better to remain quiescent than to attempt to force the truth out of Browl. The man might refuse to talk despite any methods used. Then the alarm would be given.

Only one thing gnawed at Wentworth's mind. "If you'll send the plague," Browl had said, "they'll be coffined and on the train in two hours!" What in the name of heaven was the plague? And what was its purpose since the conversation obviously meant they were to be shipped alive. The implications of that talk about Nita and the nurse made Wentworth's throat dry with anger . . . but he clung to his plan.

Browl stepped once more to the ventilation grill which masked a speaker system. "Everything all right?" he asked.

There was no answer.

Browl repeated his question and swore sharply. He stood there uncertainly, worried over the failure of his cohorts, who obviously were stationed nearby, to reply to his query.

At that instant, the outer door of the offices slammed open, and a deep voice cried out: *"Sahib!* Thy servant comes! *Sahib,* where are you!"

At the same instant, a gun crashed thunderously!

For a stunned moment, Wentworth lay motionless in the chair, realizing the doom of all his careful plans. Ram Singh had come to the rescue!

The Sikh's deep voice bellowed again in the outer office. "Ha, dog!" he cried. "Bullets bounce from the breast of a son of the lion! Die, dog!"

Wentworth opened his eyes . . . and the office was empty!

Instantly, he hurled himself from the chair and leaped toward the door that led into the adjoining operating room. The door was locked. It did not quiver at all under the shock of Wentworth's charge. Obviously, reinforced with steel.

Wentworth whipped toward the door of the outer office where once more Ram Singh was calling to him. He bounded into the main room, flung his glance swiftly about.

Except for Ram Singh and a man dead upon the floor, there was no one in the room. As Ram Singh withdrew his throwing knife from the breast of the dead man, Wentworth sprang forward and snatched up the man's gun.

The slain man was a stranger, obviously one of Browl's guards. Of Browl himself, there was no trace at all!

Ram Singh straightened with a snort of deep laughter. *"Wah, Sahib!"* he cried. "Thy servant has had a little scuffle. Three men came at me, where I stood beside the car. Two I slew there upon the walk, but the third fled here and I was compelled to wait some few moments for my knife to drink again!"

Wentworth said no word of reproach. The gallant Sikh had done the only thing possible; there was no use in worrying over the wreck of his plans.

"This way, quickly!" he ordered quietly.

Together, they hurled themselves at the door behind which Jackson had been tortured. As they sprang toward it, the gun in Wentworth's hand crashed twice. He sent his bullets ploughing into the lock, burst it asunder. Their double assault whipped the heavy door inward!

Except for Jackson, strapped helplessly in a dental chair, the office was empty!

Jackson lifted a feeble hand. There were ghastly cuts in the flesh of his face, made with a scalpel. Blood streaked his chest.

"That clothes cabinet," he said weakly. "A secret door in its back!"

WENTWORTH spun toward the cabinet, but did not approach it. As always, when he entered a new locale, he had made a mental map of the suite of offices. He knew that, beyond the wall, was the public corridor and a porter's broom closet!

"Stay here on guard, Ram Singh!" Wentworth ordered.

He bounded back out the door, crossed the outer office with long bounds and reached the corridor. The door of the porter's closet stood open! With an oath, Wentworth hurled himself toward the stairs. He had to overtake Browl. The man must be made to talk or, failing that, his mouth must be stopped! Ram Singh and Jackson, injured though they were, should be adequate guards here. . . .

The heavy roar of a powerful engine smote Wentworth's ears as he plunged through the doors of the office building. He whipped toward his car and saw it leap from the curb! A man's silhouette crouched over the wheel, and the man wore a dentist's white jacket!

Wentworth swore raggedly. In his own Daimler, he could be reasonably sure of overtaking any other car. But now the killer fled in the Daimler—and Wentworth must pursue as best he could! Wentworth's eyes swept the street, and a glad cry sprang to his lips. The thorough-going pirates had not been content with kidnaping Jackson; they had brought his coupe also! And Wentworth carried a key to that car!

In three long bounds, Wentworth had hurled himself behind the wheel of the shabby little coupe whose hood masked a powerful engine of Wentworth's own design. If any car could overtake the Daimler, already gathering speed northward along Broadway, it was this one.

Wentworth smiled thinly as the Daimler whipped westward off Broadway. When he rounded the corner, seconds later, the big car with its white-jacketed driver, was picking up a roaring speed along the cross-street. No dodging here. It was quite apparent the man knew the power of the car he had stolen, and meant to use it to put distance between himself and any possible pursuers.

But he had counted without the compact engine of the coupe. By the time the chase swept up the steep ramp to the elevated westside highway which bordered Manhattan and the Hudson River, Wentworth had halved the gap between them. Now he bore down on the accelerator, and the mounting howl of the wind, the deep-throated bellow of the engine, blotted out all other sound. Fortunately, there was slight traffic on the highway that stretched northward, with its continuations, half-way to Albany. Ample time to overhaul the Daimler.

Cars whipped backward past the two racing machines as if they were stationary. Tires screamed shudderingly on the curves; then they were racing into a straight-away. Dimly, Wentworth realized that already several miles had been covered. He was being drawn far away from the dentist's office where Nita lay unconscious. Wentworth's lips drew thin and bitter. He must end this chase now, unarmed though he was.

WENTWORTH leaned forward and switched on the super-charger. Instantly, its thin whine seemed to shriek new strength into the motor. Wentworth bent more tautly over the wheel, and the coupe shuddered to the access of power. But the tail light of the fleeing Daimler began to draw nearer, brighter. There was, suddenly, another flickering stab of rose and orange light beside the window of the Daimler, and Wentworth realized the driver was firing at him.

Wentworth laughed, coaxed more power out of the engine. The speedometer needle crept up to eighty, past it and crawled higher. The wind was a solid wall through which the coupe battered its way by main force. A slight, long curve in the road heeled the coupe over, forced Wentworth to jockey the wheel tenderly.

In the middle of that curve, the driver ahead tried to fire again—and he did. But the Daimler swerved wildly and a tire brushed the curb. In that fleeting instant, the Daimler wrecked.

In a fantastic sort of slow motion, the six-thousand pound car went into ponderous acrobatics. Its tire, blowing out, bounced the car's front end a yard into the air. It spun that way and, skittishly as a gymnast doing a side-cartwheel, it flipped the rear end around and over. It struck a central lamp post while upside down and did not even stop turning.

The post cracked through with a blue-white flash of severed electric wires and the bulbs blacked out. A curse slipped through Wentworth's locked lips. The post was whipping toward him! Impossible to check his speed. He jammed the accelerator down and leaned far forward, as if with his body he would urge one last ounce of power from the engine.

The giant, steel post bent toward him with what seemed a stately slowness. Its movement, and the race of the coupe to meet it, was as ordered as the progression of the moon about the earth . . . and Wentworth realized the speeds were almost comparable! There was inevitability about it. To wrench the wheel over now would be certain death. There was nothing he could do except pour on the gas and calculate the fall of that giant's war-club of steel.

In that still moment of waiting, he was conscious of the Daimler's movements. It completed its first somersault and bounced once in the middle of the southbound lane of traffic. When it struck, it leaped high and whirled over three times in mid-air. A crazy impulse of laughter stirred Wentworth, and the simile of an acrobat returned to him.

"A death-defying triple somersault never before attempted or accomplished by man!"

But this driver would not succeed in defying death!

The Daimler bounced once more on the rocks just beside the highway and Wentworth saw a manikin in a white jacket hurled aside and flattened against the boulders. Then the Daimler leaped out into the river. The waters surged, tremendously white and high, against the background of utter blackness. . . .

And the lamp post was whipping down toward the hood of the coupe!

IT WAS the crazy speed with which the Daimler had struck which operated then. If the lamp post had fallen straight down, nothing could have saved Wentworth. But in that last moment, the base of the lamp post kicked high into the air from the force of the initial impact. It whipped the outreaching top more steeply toward the concrete.

Wentworth felt the ragged scrape of torn steel against the top of the coupe. Then the lamp post hit concrete and somersaulted on across the highway. Wentworth's breath gusted out between locked teeth. He began cautiously to brake his car to a halt and, presently, he thumped it over the middle grass-plot between the two opposed lanes of the highway and raced back toward the scene of the accident.

It wasn't until he tried to open the door that he realized the steel top had been caved in. The crushed metal had come within inches of his skull!

Wentworth hurled himself out the opposite side of the car, hand-vaulted the railing and leaped across the rocks with the agility of a chamois.

The man in the white jacket was draped on a bed of jagged rocks. He lay there like a heap of cast-off clothing, and with no more rigidity than a cupful of lukewarm jelly. But his face was recognizable. Wentworth stared incredulously down at him for a moment. Then he whirled and raced back to the coupe.

The dead man . . . *was not Dr Browl!*

Wentworth was back in his coupe, shooting southward along the highway before the first siren whine of the police made itself heard. And Wentworth's face was white with dread. He had been tricked. Browl had sent another man, in his jacket, to lead him away, while Browl himself. . . .

Wild conjectures flew through Wentworth's mind as to Browl's purpose in the subterfuge, but he knew the reason. He knew terribly!

Finally, Wentworth reached the dental office and hurled himself at the stairs. His feet made no sound. The revolver in his fist seemed a live and prescient thing, seeking prey. The office door was closed. Wentworth wrenched it open, and bounded through.

A hoarse cry tore its way out of his throat!

On the floor lay the giant Sikh, his breast stained with blood!

Wentworth leaped past the gallant Ram Singh in a frenzy of haste. Then his gun sagged to his side. Even his dauntless head bowed.

Aside from the wounded Sikh, the office was empty! Nita and Jackson had been carried off by the pirates!

CHAPTER FIVE

Nita's Doom

NITA VAN SLOAN remembered nothing at all from the time the dentist's needle stabbed into her throat until she heard the cry. It was the cry of a man in fearful torment, a cry wrung out of him despite a desperate courage. Could this be a nightmare?

Nita had heard an injured animal make such a sound.

She shuddered back to consciousness. She tried to lift a hand to her throbbing head and could not. A rope about her wrists stopped her!

Once more that awful cry ached into the darkness in which Nita lay, and after that there was a waiting silence. She opened her eyes.

For the moment, she was conscious only that there was nothing familiar about this concrete-walled room in which she found herself. She saw a ceiling that was draped in silks. She saw a heavy, ornate brass lamp that swung by chains from the ceiling. And then she was aware of the tingling scent of incense.

That was when it all swam back into her consciousness; that was the moment when first she knew stark terror. She remembered that Dick Wentworth had been helpless in the dental chair . . . and she knew that she was in the hands of Chinese torturers! No, dear God, this was no dream!

In that first sickening moment of realization, she wrenched violently at her bonds and thrust herself up from the floor on which she lay. That awful cry! It could not—it must not—be Dick, from whom that moan of agony had been wrung!

Staring about the dimly lit room, Nita sought frantically the source of that cry. Against the far wall she saw the red glow of fire, caught sight of a brazier from which protruded the handles of instruments of torture! Then she saw the tortured man!

He dangled by his thumbs from an overhead beam, and heavy weights were fastened to his dangling feet. But his head sagged backward and all his body held the limpness of unconsciousness. At least, for the moment he could not be tortured. And it wasn't Dick. It was . . . oh, God in heaven, *it was Jackson!*

It was only afterward that Nita could look about the room in which she lay. She was searching desperately for Dick, but she wasn't sure that she wanted to find him! It would at least mean that he was alive . . . and she could not believe that he would allow herself and Jackson to be captured if he were still able to defend them! Hauntingly, her eyes went over the room. As she stared, her bewilderment increased . . . and her fears!

There were only three men in the room now . . . the three Chinese who squatted on their heels there where Jackson hung in the torture rack. They were waiting for him to recover consciousness. At one end of the long, low room, there was a raised dais like an altar before the hideous image of a heathen god.

And against the back wall were rows of long, oblong boxes. They were grim black boxes, and there were many of them. They were coffins!

Even as Nita stared incredulously at the coffins, a group of four more of the Chinese men came shuffling into the room through the curtains which hid the walls behind the coffins. Carelessly, they began to remove the lids of the boxes, and Nita heard them chuckling and laughing together in their high-pitched voices. One of them reached into the coffin and . . . and *stroked* something with a curiously caressing movement.

In terror, Nita allowed herself to slump to the floor again, just a moment before the Chinese turned her way. Nita realized that she herself lay close beside another of the coffins! And the Chinese were coming toward her!

Nita had already found that she was helpless against the ropes that bound her. Wrists and ankles were immovably, painfully tied together. She set her teeth upon her lips and schooled herself against betraying consciousness. It was the only thing she could do! Her eyes were closed, but her ears brought her the shuffle-shuffle of approaching feet, like the sibilance of a snake's slow glide. The men chattered in their sliding sing-song of words, came to a halt directly over her.

NITA felt a foot prod her side and forced her body to relax. She gave no sign. One of the men giggled and she heard his hoarse breathing as he bent over her; she smelt the foulness of his breath. His hands were fumbling about her. . . .

Nita knew a deep rage; in another moment, she would hurl herself, bound as she was, against these foul beasts of men. But she had glimpsed their torture of Jackson. She knew that this was only a horrid preliminary. Somehow, she held her poise of unconsciousness. . . .

Presently, she was aware again of the high giggle of the Chinese and realized they were farther away!

Cautiously, she slit her eyes and peered beneath her thick lashes toward the four figures of torment. They had not gone very far, just to the other side of the coffin behind which she lay. From that spot, she suddenly heard a girl cry out in frightened anger!

All four of the Chinese were busy now. They reached down, and Nita saw them lift a girl in a nurse's white uniform. Uncomprehendingly, she realized that it was the girl who had come to summon her from the car . . . the dentist's nurse! But she, too, was a prisoner!

Tensely, Nita watched while they carried the girl to the altar. Her bonds had been slashed from her, and one of the yellow men held her by each extended arm. They forced her to bow three times to the hideous statue of the idol, then they whirled her about so that Nita could see her terror-paled face.

Facing her stood one of the leering Chinese, and he gripped a keen-bladed knife in his fist! While Nita watched, he reached to her wrist—and ran the knife all the way to the shoulder!

Nita barely smothered down a cry, but no gush of blood answered the touch of the knife. Instead, the tight sleeve of the nurse's uniform fell away from her arm! By the time Nita had realized that, the other sleeve had been similarly treated . . . and the Chinese slashed straight across the breast of the uniform!

Then, with a lingering slowness that was horrible, the Chinese proceeded to strip the clothes from the nurse's shrinking body!

Her voice babbled helpless pleas. She strained and wrenched against the grip on her arms. And all the while, above the hopelessness of her voice, ran the giggling salacity of the Chinese laughter!

Finally, the nurse stood nude upon the altar, held by the two men. The man who had wielded the knife stepped back and gestured toward the guards. They nodded, pressed the girl's elbows in close to her sides. They folded her hands upon her breast, and held them there.

Incredulously, Nita watched the knife-wielder. He had thrust the weapon into his girdle, and now he had picked up a device of long rubbery tubes, a jar of viscous fluid that gleamed dull yellow in the dim light.

Good Lord in heaven. The thing was a paint spray-gun!

Even as Nita recognized the tool, the Chinese loosed its spray against the nurse's legs, sweeping them from foot to thigh. Next, he sent the gleaming yellow paint upon her shoulders. After that, the two Chinese who held her stepped away from the nurse!

She was screaming hoarsely, her head wrenched back in an agony of pain. Her body twisted from side to side, her head rolled.

Her legs and arms did not move at all! The Chinese were giggling again, and now the paint was used more slowly. The misted spray swirled about the nurse's alabaster white body, and where it touched the flesh became motionless took on the solidity of metal!

The girl was being converted in a golden statue!

NITA never knew how long the torment, the hoarse screaming lasted. She only knew that presently the Chinese carried the girl's rigid body to a coffin and dropped it callously into the box. Two other Chinese were summoned and carried the box away through the curtains.

And then . . . and then, the Chinese came toward Nita!

Nita schooled herself for farther torment, but this time the Chinese did not attempt to see if she had recovered consciousness. They jerked her to her feet and bore her away toward the altar!

Desperately, Nita sought for courage to stand the thing which awaited her. Something she knew of her fate. The nurse had not been killed. That paint obviously anesthetized her, froze her body into rigidity.

But God alone knew to what hell she was being carried now!

Nita maintained her pose of partial consciousness. Her feet dragged, and she lifted her head spasmodically and heavily. The ropes had been slashed from the nurse; Nita did not want the Chinese too wary when they removed her bonds!

There were four of them, and they were armed, but Nita thought that she could give a good account of herself with the

jiu jitsu that Wentworth had insisted upon teaching her long ago. The ropes were falling away from her ankles now; she felt the kiss of steel and her wrists were freed. Fortunately, they had not been tied very long. They had almost all their feeling and strength.

Still, Nita feigned semi-consciousness. She was thrust up on the altar, and two of the Chinese bent her body in its three bows before the hideous statue. There were only the two of them. Another had gone to get the paint-gun ready. The fourth stood ready with his knife.

Nita's lips shut grimly. The moment had come!

She allowed her body to sag limply forward as the two Chinese bent her in the third bow. As she had expected, they yanked her backward. That was what she wanted! As they jerked at her arms, Nita hurled her whole weight violently backward!

The amazed Chinese were caught off-balance. They wheeled half about, and Nita wrenched free of the grip on her left arm. She dropped to her back upon the altar, still clinging to the arm of the other Chinese!

The man cried out in shrill alarm. He felt himself falling; his arm was wrenched almost from its socket. Then Nita drove both feet upward, violently, into the man's stomach! His scream was cut off, driven out of him by that blow. The Chinese somersaulted in a weird pinwheel of flailing, helpless arms and legs . . . and crashed into the knife-man who was rushing forward!

As the two of them went down, Nita leaped nimbly to her feet. The Chinese from whom she had wrenched free ripped his knife from his belt, sprang toward her. That was perfect for Nita's purpose. She caught the down-slashing knife arm, used a hip-throw to hurl him atop the two fallen men.

She whirled to run . . . and strong hands gripped her firmly from behind.

Before she could set herself, those hands made sure of their hold. One had set upon her leg above the knee, the other gripped her shoulder. With the ease of a derrick, her captor whirled her from the floor and held her helpless, far above his head!

Nita twisted her head about fearfully and glared down into the grinning face of a huge Chinese.

"She-devil pretty good," the man said. "Not good enough."

ABRUPTLY, the man dropped her! Nita knew how to fall, but the shock of striking upon the stone altar drove the breath from her body. Her head reeled dizzily, and when she could see clearly again, she was once more on her feet. An immovable prisoner in the grip of the huge Chinese who had trapped her, she could do nothing.

And the Chinese with the knife grinned evilly into her face . . . and slit her shoulder straps.

Nita's cheeks burned with fury as that keen blade set about stripping her clothing. She lifted her head proudly, and set her eyes far above the men who jeered and giggled as they sought to torment her. Not a sound escaped her lips. They would learn the courage of . . . the *Spider's* mate!

Nita fought for control over her shrinking body. She sought for something on which she could focus her whole attention. There was nothing save the heavy lamp that dangled on chains from the silk draped ceiling.

She stared at it, strained her eyes to fathom the pierced scroll work and the design. A sob thrust into her throat, but she held it down resolutely. The knife of this fiendish Chinese had almost finished its work. In a few moments. . . .

Nita's eyes suddenly stretched wide. Up there, in the ceiling, she thought she had caught a flash of another knife! It was impossible of course, but she could have sworn that a knife had slashed the silken ceiling of the room!

It was incredible. No man could be invading this den of hell. Dick, alive, would not have permitted her to fall into the hands of these Chinese. And no one save Dick, save the *Spider* could be coming now to the rescue. It was madness. . . .

Nita tried to tear her eyes away from that swinging lamp, away from the dark streak that might be a slit in the silk. She knew that the knife-wielding Chinese had stepped back now to pick up the paint-gun. The compressed air swished as he tested the trigger, stepped toward her. . . . And then, in that close-walled underground room, Nita heard laughter!

It was flat laughter, metallic and mocking. It was full of menace, and it froze the Chinese into statues of fright and alarm.

It was the laughter of the *Spider!*

As the Chinese stared, before they could move to grab for their weapons, a figure in black seemed to burst through the ceiling of the room! Black cape flying from his shoulders, deadly black gun in his fist, the figure of the *Spider* leaped through space!

THERE was a ring of metal as his body struck the swinging Chinese lamp, then he was swinging in a long arc toward the altar! The gun in his hand spewed out streaks of fire, and the paint-blower exploded! The Chinese who held it screamed as the paint spewed upward into his face; screamed and was instantly silent, motionless . . . his face converted into a golden, evil mask!

All that in a space of seconds, while the *Spider* swung through the air on the chain of the lamp. Then he freed his grip, was flying straight toward Nita!

Once more, while he leaped toward

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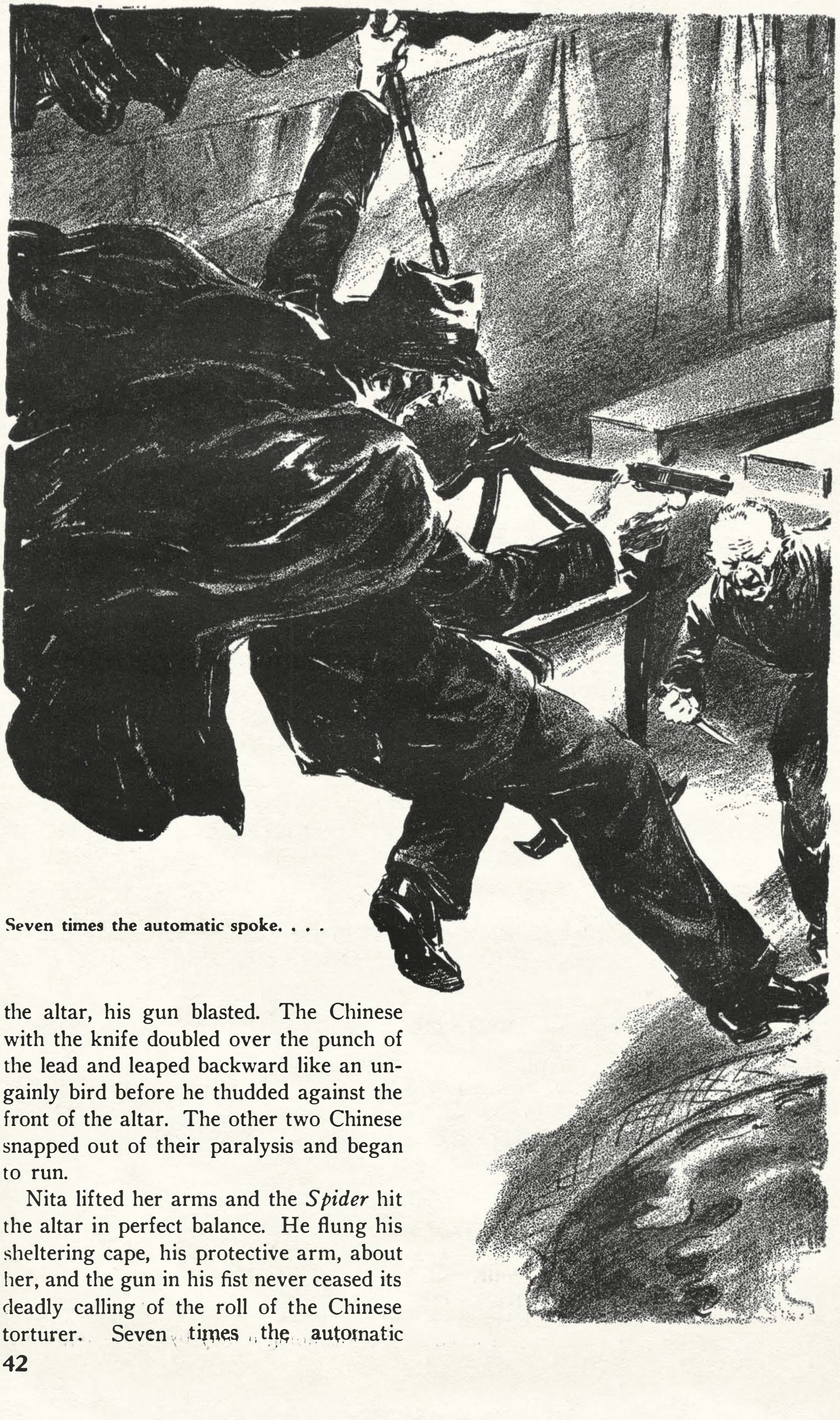
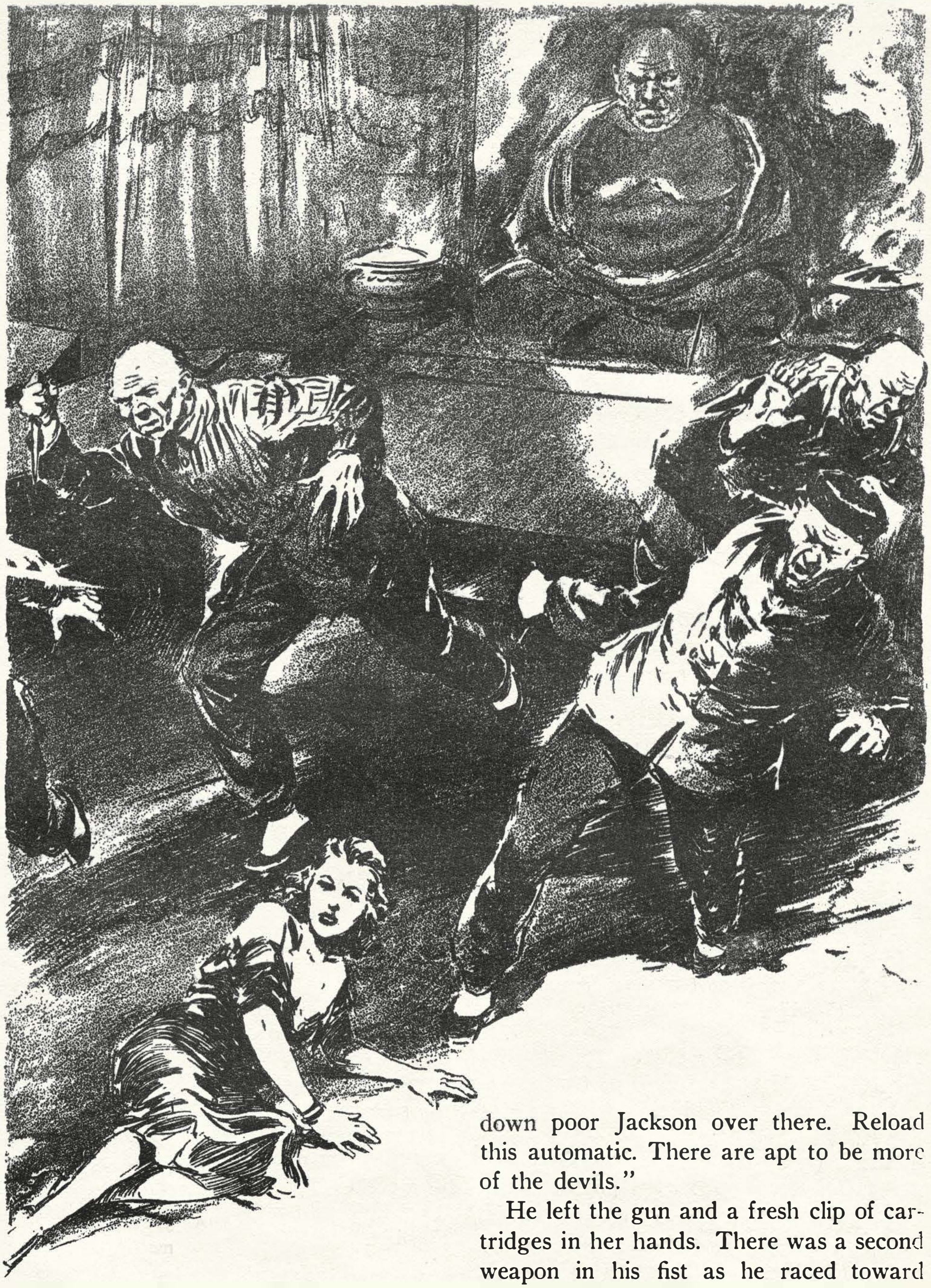


Seven times the automatic spoke. . . .

the altar, his gun blasted. The Chinese with the knife doubled over the punch of the lead and leaped backward like an ungainly bird before he thudded against the front of the altar. The other two Chinese snapped out of their paralysis and began to run.

Nita lifted her arms and the *Spider* hit the altar in perfect balance. He flung his sheltering cape, his protective arm, about her, and the gun in his fist never ceased its deadly calling of the roll of the Chinese torturer. Seven times the automatic



spoke, seven times Chinese screamed their answer to that summons of death.

When the last crashing echo died out, there was an aching silence in that underground hell.

"Take my cape, dear," Wentworth said, and his voice was tender. "I must cut down poor Jackson over there. Reload this automatic. There are apt to be more of the devils."

He left the gun and a fresh clip of cartridges in her hands. There was a second weapon in his fist as he raced toward Jackson. Nita watched him a long moment while she gathered the remnants of her clothing about her. She felt suddenly very weak. She sat down on the altar, and her head sagged forward. She was stuffing fresh cartridges into the automatic, but she was doing it only by the feeling of her hands. Her eyes . . . why, she was crying!

She should have known Dick would come. He had never failed to come when she needed him. . . .

She heard the thud as the weights were cut loose from Jackson's feet, heard his feeble voice. But when she lifted her head, Jackson stubbornly was walking across the room under his own power. His chest was slashed and seared, but his head was lifted indomitably.

"I don't want help, sir," he said, harshly, to Wentworth. "What I want is a chance to settle scores with those yellow devils! But how in God's name you found us. . . . I didn't know where they were taking us myself!"

Wentworth said rapidly. "You're underneath a linen supply laundry that takes care chiefly of the professional offices. They hire Chinese to do the work. The laundry is about fifty feet from the morgue of Public Hospital."

Nita held out the reloaded automatic, and her hand trembled, but the smile on her lips was brave.

"They sprayed the nurse from that dentist's office with that horrible yellow stuff," she said. "Then they carried her off in a coffin."

Wentworth nodded, and a grim smile touched his disguised lips. "I stopped them leaving the morgue," he said, "and forced one of them to lead me back here. I'm hoping that more of the men will come for her. Nita, you and Jackson, will follow them. If you can patch up Jackson. . . ."

"I'll patch myself, sir," Jackson said gruffly. "Begging your pardon. It'll be a tonic to me to take a poke at some of those yellow devils!"

Nita said, "Just give me a few moments to improvise some clothes." She was a little breathless and she ducked behind the altar, taking her knife-ripped clothing with her.

Wentworth turned and looked keenly at Jackson. The man's color was good despite the things that had been done to him. "Lie down," Wentworth ordered shortly. "I'll have to take a few stitches in some of those gashes, and dress those burns."

JACKSON grimaced, but he obeyed, stretching out on his back on the altar. Wentworth stood so that he could face the openings of the room, and set swiftly to work with equipment taken from a compact first-aid kit which he always carried. The *Spider* had need to be prepared for wounds!

Jackson set his jaw, and looked up into the *Spider's* face as he worked swiftly, and there was almost idolatry in his gaze.

"They took me like a kid, sir," he reported. "That mug you told me to take prisoner was a plant. Four of them jumped me when I walked up to the car where this plant was sitting."

Wentworth said, crisply, "They're clever devils. Jackson, I shall have to leave the city as soon as I can make contact with Kirkpatrick. The pirates are robbing a train. The girl in the coffin is going to be shipped to their headquarters. You must not lose the trail, nor allow yourself to be captured. Wait for further orders after locating the headquarters."

"Yes, major," Jackson acknowledged. He caught his breath as the needle Wentworth was using bit into his flesh. "I can't understand," he gasped, "how you followed us here."

Wentworth glanced at him keenly, knew why Jackson spoke. He was suffering more than flesh could stand after the torments he had undergone.

Wentworth laughed. "It was fairly simple, Jackson," he said. "Ram Singh remained conscious long enough to tell me that Chinese had come after him. The devils put three bullets through Ram Singh. If he dies . . ."

Jackson stirred a little. "I'll murder seventeen of them for every bullet! Ram Singh isn't worth a whoop in Halifax, but they can't push us around like this!"

Wentworth's eyes were gentle, for he knew that Jackson would wade through hell for the gallant Sikh. He went on rapidly. "After I called an ambulance for Ram Singh and did what I could for him, I looked around," he said. "I saw that all the soiled linen had been carried away and fresh linen put in its place! Now, I knew Ram Singh would not have permitted that to happen while he was on his feet. He wouldn't have let anyone in. And no one coming afterward would have made the change of linen after seeing Ram Singh stretched out on the floor.

"So the linen had been changed by the same persons who had shot Ram Singh—and carried off you and Miss Nita!"

Jackson pushed out a long breath as Wentworth took the last stitch. "Sounds simple when you tell it, sir," he said.

Wentworth began to use iodine and Jackson quit talking to clench his jaw. Wentworth spoke rapidly to distract him.

"There are only three linen supply companies in the city," he said, "that use Chinese employees. I knew that the pirates planned to ship captives in coffins . . . so I picked the laundry near a morgue. After that, I was lucky enough to find them carrying out a coffin, and found the nurse in it. Poor girl! Her only chance of living, I'm afraid, is to allow her to go where these devils intend for her to go. Otherwise, this yellow stuff will destroy her."

"I'll take care of her," Jackson said harshly. "She put up a game fight."

Wentworth straightened, his task finished, and Nita came swiftly toward him. She was entirely recovered now, and her lips held a brave smile. Wentworth gathered her into his arms, and bent the harsh-lined face of the *Spider* above her. Nita lifted a hand to caress the countenance that spread such terror among the Underworld.

Neither of them spoke, and Wentworth released her quickly. "Kirkpatrick is at the hospital with those two friends of Hartford . . . the man the pirates made walk the plank," he said. "I've got to get Kirkpatrick to warn the railroad of the holdup that's impending. Then I'll trail the train. These pirates must be destroyed! Come, my dear, I'll lead you out of this inferno, and then. . . ."

Nita sighed, "The *Spider* strikes!"

Wentworth smiled grimly, and before he left that scene of horror, he stopped beside the Chinese who had fallen beneath the deluge of golden paint. Wentworth stooped over him, and pressed to his forehead the base of his slim platinum cigarette lighter.

Then he strode on, an arm about Nita's shoulders . . . Jackson grim-faced in his wake, with a gun in his fist.

And on the forehead of the dead Chinese there gleamed a thing of scarlet fury, a symbol of hairy legs and poison fangs . . . *the seal of the Spider!*

ALONG the corridor of the hospital, Commissioner Kirkpatrick moved with long, decisive strides. At his shoulder, Inspector Littlejohn kept pace, and the faces of both men were long with determination.

The nurse was half-running to keep abreast of them. "Gentlemen!" she protested, "I have told you that Dr. Henshaw insists these two men cannot be disturbed! They have suffered severely from shock. Any further excitement. . . ."

Kirkpatrick's voice was polite, but incisive. "Call Dr. Henshaw, if you wish. We are interviewing Carlyle and Melville immediately!"

Littlejohn's thin mouth expressed his satisfaction. The hot blue flames of his eyes were masked under half-lowered lids. He stepped ahead of Kirkpatrick to open the door of the hospital room. His hand, gripping the knob, pushed aside a sign that read: *"Critical. Do not disturb."*

Kirkpatrick's step lightened as he moved into the room. On beds side by side lay the two men. Carlyle's bald head moved restlessly; Melville had his eyes closed. In the shadows of a corner near the window, a man in an orderly's white jacket was adjusting clothing in a closet.

Kirkpatrick stepped close to Carlyle's bed introduced himself. "I want to ask you some questions about your friend and associate, Hartford," he said quietly.

Carlyle's restless head was still. His eyes, glistening under the droop of hairless lids, focused attentively on Kirkpatrick's face. Carlyle's whisper was sharp with sibilance.

"What has the fool done now?" he demanded.

The door was thrust open and a man in a doctor's long trailing coat of white strode in belligerently. He was big in the shoulders and the forward thrust of his head was challenging.

"I must insist you leave this room at once," he said curtly. "I have forbidden anyone to see these patients!"

Inspector Littlejohn wheeled about on one heel. He was shorter than the doctor and he tipped back his head a little so that the round direct glare of his eyes struck the doctor's face.

"Who are you?" he rasped.

"I'm Dr. Henshaw," the man snapped back at him. "Chief of staff here."

Littlejohn nodded. "These two men are under arrest," he said. "We have summoned police doctors and we will be responsible. Get out."

Henshaw's lips curled back angrily from his teeth. His sharp glance shot over the room. The nurse was behind him. The door of the closet was open a small crack, but the orderly was not in sight.

"The fact that you are officers of the law," Henshaw said flatly, "does not permit you to violate the law! As long as these men are my patients, they are my sole responsibility. Leave the room, or I shall prefer charges against you!"

From the bed, Melville spoke in a weary voice. "Cut out the nonsense, Henshaw. You're making more disturbance than the police. You're not worried about us, merely about the usurpation of your prerogative."

Carlyle cackled thinly. "My friend doesn't speak often," he said. "When he does, it has . . . point. What about that crook, Hartford?"

Dr. Henshaw flushed, bowed stiffly. "Mr. Carlyle and Mr. Melville can, of course, overrule me. However, I must repeat my warning. Each of them has suffered a severe shock, the exact nature of which is not apparent. Their hearts have been strained. I shall remain to administer restoratives if they are needed."

Melville had not opened his eyes. He sighed, "Oh, shut up, Henshaw."

Carlyle cackled again. "I hope something has happened to Hartford," he said flatly. "He has, we discovered tonight, involved us with the law. The federal law. Without our knowledge, he has sold government-ordered instruments to foreign warring powers!"

Littlejohn stepped forward alertly, and Kirkpatrick's eyes were narrowed. Neither of them saw the door of the closet swing wide. It was hard to see the figure that crouched there, misshapen shoulders hunched; face thin and menacing. The figure was all in black.

No one saw it . . . but suddenly, flat and mocking laughter sounded through the room.

"You lie, Carlyle," the voice said. "Tell the gentlemen that you are lying. . . . *Don't move, Littlejohn!"*

LITTLEJOHN'S head whipped about and red spots of anger burned in his cheeks. But his body remained stiffly unmoving.

"The Spider!" he whispered in a strangled voice.

Commissioner Kirkpatrick threw up his head in challenge. "Drop your gun, *Spider,"* he ordered curtly. "I have only to sound my whistle and a squad of my men will be here. You cannot escape!"

"I shot you once, Kirkpatrick," the *Spider* said softly. "Don't make me do it again. . . . Presently, you may blow your whistle, but first I have some matters to communicate to you. I shall talk rapidly, and I shall not repeat!"

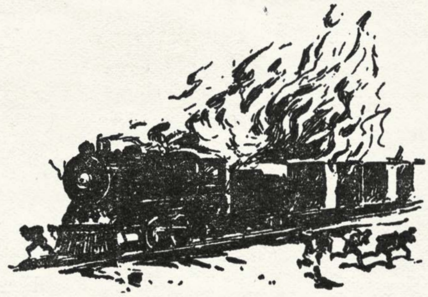
"I shall tell you about these gentlemen, presently," he said, "but there are other more pressing affairs. Kirkpatrick, I'm afraid the New York Central wouldn't pay sufficient attention to me. I want you to call them and tell them that the special freight which left here this afternoon for San Francisco, the one which carries the instruments from Carlyle's plant, is going to be held up, looted and burned . . . as two other trains have been."

Kirkpatrick said slowly, "I'll listen because it seems a public duty to hear what you have to say. I have never gone wrong on your information . . . but this time, *Spider,* you're wrong. There was no looting of the other two trains that burned."

Wentworth shook his head slowly, and his eyes were never still. Littlejohn was a tough man, and fearless. Also an excellent shot. Carlyle and Melville were uncertain quantities, as was this Dr. Henshaw.

"Why do you say that, Kirkpatrick?" he asked softly.

Kirkpatrick moved the hand that held his police whistle in an impatient gesture. "There was no means of transport from the point of the wreck and fire," he said. "The Santa Fe fire was in the middle of a swamp. Boat transport was not possible, since there was no egress from the lake. The second fire, on the Louisville and Nashville, was in the mountains. There were no roads."



"But there was a grass plateau," Wentworth's voice was mocking. "Amphibion planes could have landed there . . . and on the lake in the swamp! That is what happened. You are facing piracy, Kirkpatrick. The manner of Hartford's death shows you that you have men of imagination to deal with. Also piracy.

"Will you give my warning to the New York Central?"

For a long moment, the eyes of the two men met across the width of the room. There were the two hospital beds between them, and Wentworth could read anger and uncertainty, and a growing tension in Kirkpatrick's face. Littlejohn was shifting his position by movements too slight and slow to be seen. Dr. Henshaw's shoulders were against the wall, and his teeth caught a glisten of light.

Kirkpatrick said, slowly, "I'll think about this."

"Time is pressing, Kirkpatrick!" the *Spider* urged sharply.

Kirkpatrick repeated what he had said, added: "If there is nothing in the records to contradict your theory, I will warn them."

With that, Wentworth had to be satisfied. Kirkpatrick was not a man who could be driven. Wentworth moved sideways toward the window.

"Two last words," he said softly. "Under the laundry which abutts the hospital's morgue, you will find the den of a group of Chinese white slavers. They are connected with the pirates. And Hartford is not guilty of the things charged against him by these two men. As a matter of fact—"

Wentworth never finished the sentence. Melville's head rolled toward him, and the eyes were open. Then Melville's right hand jerked under the covers of the bed!

THE *Spider* read menace in Melville's eyes and acted with the speed of thought. Even as Melville's hand moved under the covers, the *Spider* was leaping forward in a long swift dive! The crash of Melville's hidden gun was muffled. A black hole punched through the bed covers, and then began to char with a running, small tongue of flame. His bullet . . . smashed the door where the *Spider* had stood!

Wentworth's long leap carried him head-first beneath Melville's bed. He skated on the smooth floor across the narrow space between the two beds, and his hands reached out for the legs of Kirkpatrick and Littlejohn!

The police whistle shrilled piercingly!

Then Wentworth's hands closed on Kirkpatrick's feet. A yank spilled the Commissioner to the floor. Littlejohn dropped deliberately to his knees. He jammed his gun almost in the *Spider's* face and pulled the trigger!

Only the fact that Wentworth's arms already were reaching for Littlejohn saved him that time. He smacked a hand sideways against Littlejohn's elbow, and the bullet and gun-flame burned past his ear. Then the *Spider* was out from under the bed. His fists flew and cracked hard against Littlejohn's jaw.

His blow drove the inspector backward against the wall while he still crouched. Littlejohn's shoulders struck. His feet popped out from under him, and he slumped crazily sideways. An enamel pitcher smacked against Wentworth's shoulders. Dr. Henshaw swung his stethoscope on high and swiped at the *Spider's* face. . . then the *Spider* bolted from the hospital chamber and slapped the door shut.

Already, the feet of police were pounding up the steps at each of the corridor. Kirkpatrick was struggling to his feet inside. Perhaps two seconds passed between the time the door closed and opened again; perhaps three seconds before the first police exploded into the ends of the corridor. They romped eagerly toward Kirkpatrick who stood in the entrance of the room with his gun in his fist.

Kirkpatrick pointed toward an orderly who was pushing a basket of soiled linen along the hall. "Grab that man!" he ordered.

The police ringed the orderly, and Kirkpatrick strode forward angrily. "Rip off that jacket, but be careful!" he commanded.

"What's the matter?" the man whined. "I ain't done a thing. I'm just collecting the laundry. I just come out of that room there, and you grab me."

Kirkpatrick gazed doubtfully at the man. He stepped very close and carefully scraped the man's cheek with a fingernail. There was no makeup. Kirkpatrick shook his head in bewilderment. "Search every room on this floor," he ordered. "Also, the laundry basket!"

The police went into the laundry basket like terriers, hurling the sheets and pillow-cases to the floor. In the very bottom, they found the big black hat, the black cape of the *Spider*. But they found nothing else.

The *Spider* had vanished!

It was a half hour after the police left that a man with a bandaged head threw aside the sheets in the room opposite that of Carlyle and Melville. He shucked off a hospital jacket, rapidly buttoned up the shirt that had been turned down at the throat, and once more adjusted his tie.

From his pocket, he took the stethoscope he had snatched from Dr. Henshaw. He tucked the ends about his neck, left the diaphram dangling on his chest and, with a preoccupied air, eyes fixed on the floor, he walked swiftly along the corridors, and went down in the elevator.

On the first floor, a nurse stepped up to him. She smiled pleasantly. "Doctor, your stethoscope," she said.

The man lifted his head. "Eh? My stethoscope. . . . Oh, thank you, nurse."

He nodded and went past the cloakroom where he caught up a hat, went out swinging it in his hand. The nurse stared after him. "Come to think of it," she muttered to herself. "I don't remember seeing him before. And that was Dr. Henshaw's hat! He—" She whirled toward the telephone operator. "Call the police quickly!" she cried. "The *Spider* just escaped from the hospital!"

She ran to the front doors, and stared out into the darkness. She saw nothing, nothing at all. But when she turned back to go inside, she thought she heard a faint sound . . . and she shuddered.

It sounded exactly like the laughter of the *Spider!*

CHAPTER SIX

Pirate Loot

THROUGH the quieting streets of Manhattan, Richard Wentworth drove his battered coupe furiously. He chose back streets, and he disregarded what few traffic lights remained working. New York was as quiet as it ever became. The clattering roar of elevated trains was infrequent; infrequent night-hawk cabs bumbled along, and the march of interstate trucking had not yet begun.

Only the lights that marked the stairways showed in apartment buildings, and the remote sky of the cities had drawn closer, darker upon the house tops. Wentworth pushed open the bullet-proof windshield to let the cool air fan his tanned, strained cheeks. He was conscious for the first time of weariness—and there were hours of labor ahead of him.

There was a deep crease of thought between his brows as he pushed the coupe to greater speed. He had told Kirkpatrick virtually all he knew about the pirates. Previously, he had tipped off Dr. Browl's headquarters to the police. But all this was not enough. Kirkpatrick undoubtedly would warn the railway of his suspicions concerning the previous wrecks; and what threatened the particular train on which Carlyle's instruments were speeding westward. He doubted that the railway could take any adequate means to protect the train.

Wentworth's lips drew more thinly together. Even the fact that the *Spider* was racing to protect that same train might not help! He had no way of telling in what force the pirates would attack; that it would be considerable, he was reasonably sure. The looting of a freight train, by airplanes, would at least require pilots and many men to make the transfer of valuables.

Wentworth shook the thought from his head. He would know those things when he arrived at the still unguessed site of the holdup. Before that time, speculation was premature. But there were other matters on which he could focus his attention—the headquarters of this pirate mob!

So far, Wentworth knew only the facts that Dr. Browl had dropped in his brief talk with LaFitte, over the radio. The headquarters was "out there" . . . a relatively meaningless phrase except that it meant definitely the place was not in the city. And the headquarters was more or less isolated; probably the pirates remained virtual prisoners in their hideout. Otherwise, there would be no need to kidnap helpless women and ship them into slavery through the medium of those fiendish Chinese!

At the memory, rage shook Wentworth. Nita and Jackson would be on the trail in New York . . . but the *Spider* raced on to strike first!

The city had been left far behind now, and Wentworth turned off the main highway into a side road, came presently to a high steel fence which bore a sign: *Danger! 20,000 volts!*

A watchman strode alertly forward, flashlight and gun in his hands. When the illumination fell on the face of Richard Wentworth, the man at once saluted. He ran to open the gate. Wentworth drove to a metal hangar, attached to an extensive machine shop, and together with the watchman, rolled a plane to the line.

"She's a beauty, sir," the watchman said. "The government sure ought to be grateful for this boat!*

Wentworth made no response, but set the compression starters whining and cranked the ship's two twelve-hundred horsepower engines. The plane was of curious construction. A mid-wing monoplane, it carried the two powerful motors in nacells upon this wing, which housed the armament. While the motors warmed, Wentworth checked the fuel and the ship's armament. It carried two cannon, the smallest a thirty-seven millimeter, and four machine-guns. His face was grim.

"No lights!" he called to the watchman and waved the man back to his post.

Afterward, he taxied the plane into the wind and pushed open the throttles. The ship fairly leaped into the air after an incredibly short run. Its twin motors howled their way into the night.

Wentworth glanced briefly at the instruments to make sure that everything was functioning properly, and set the ship on her course. The freight train by which the instruments were being sped westward was one of the special high-speed runs. Only the crack limiteds took right of way from this type of freight. Consequently, it already had crossed the Mississippi and was racing toward the Dust Bowl.

Wentworth calculated that he would overtake the train in a little over three hours. . . .

THE Springdale Special was not an extra-fare train. It ran between Wyotah City and Springdale in four hours and seventeen minutes, with only six stops. It was a popular train because the Pullmans were cut off in the Springdale yards, and passengers were permitted to continue sleeping until nine o'clock.

Wealthy people who had been to Wyotah City for the occasional road shows that stopped there always rode the Springdale Special. The Pullmans were full tonight. Not an untaken berth. Even Banker Goodman had trouble getting a whole section to himself, it was so full.

Lucky thing he had seen young George Rogers coming back from his honeymoon with that Smith girl. He had known at once that he could count on Rogers to give up their upper berth so he could have his section. Spineless young pup. But the girl was pretty. . . .

Banker Goodman was a little restless

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[*] ***NOTE:*** **When I ran across this in my notes on this particular adventure of the *Spider*, I made a special inquiry of Mr. Wentworth. He waved the matter aside as of little importance, but when I persisted, he told me something that I hadn't known before. For some years, he had maintained an experimental laboratory for development of airplane improvements. There can be no doubt that his keen brain was directly responsible for many of the radical departures in design which have lately contributed to the government army and navy efficiency. From descriptions of this particular ship, furnished me by Mr. Wentworth, I became convinced that it was at least partly responsible for the new Buell Air-Python. You will recall that, in The Air-Python is a bi-motored interceptor with speeds which have not been revealed, but are well over the four-hundred mile-an-hour mark. This Air-Python can carry two cannon and four machine guns, which was exactly the armament of Wentworth's plane. This is another thing which makes me believe this ship was the forerunner of the Buell design.**

and excited. The mail car up ahead carried a hundred thousand dollars for his bank. Now, Springdale could get that new factory branch. It would cut down unemployment, if those lazy loafers could be made to work. Living on the fat of the land while he paid relief taxes. It was all the fault of the government. . . . Of course, there might be some good in the government, once a man like Banker Goodman pointed the way. They had made this hundred thousand dollars possible. . . .

Banker Goodman was still awake when, just before dawn, the Springdale Special made an unscheduled stop. For a while, Banker Goodman took that in good grace. Then he grunted and jabbed the porter's button.

"What's going on?" he demanded sharply. "What's this stop?"

The porter grinned widely. "Freight train running special; sir," he reported. "Got to wait on the siding for her to go by. Everything got to stand aside for that freight, 'cept maybe the Blue Comet. Yes, sir."

Banker Goodman said stiffly, "I object to being kept waiting for a freight train, I shall write to President Jameson about it!"

The porter said, "Yes, sir!"

Goodman grumbled to himself, but there was a secret satisfaction in this waiting for the freight to go by. After all, it might mean that business was picking up a little. . . .

"I went west on the Blue Comet last fall," he said. "It's a fair train."

"Yes, sir!" the Porter bobbed. "Yes, sir, a fine train!"

That was the moment when the window of Banker Goodman's section crashed inward. A small oblate object like a lopsided black baseball lobbed in and hit the floor.

It didn't make much noise when it exploded. Blue-white fingers of fire thrust up into the air, shivered and blacked out. The curtains of Banker Goodman's section hung in ribbons. Banker Goodman lay, charred and naked, on the floor. There were a few muffled shouts, then silence. No one moved in the car . . . in any of the cars where the other bombs burst.

Outside, in the darkness, men trotted to a common center near the mail car where a big-shouldered giant of a man stood. He had a bristling black beard which he combed with blunt fingers while he glowered at the men. In his right hand, he gripped a big automatic.

"Half-hour before the freight comes," he rumbled. "Soapy, crack that express car crib. Rest of you go through the train. Pick it clean—and no fooling with dames. If you see something you like, just bring her along for the celebration."

The men laughed in furtive whispers and began to spread along the train.

"I MAKE SURE EACH BOTTLE'S BIGGER-12 OUNCES FULL"
Pepsi-Cola
A SPARKLING BEVERAGE
REFRESHING-SATISFYING
12 OUNCES
REFRESHING-ENJOYABLE
FAMOUS FOR OVER 40 YEARS
5¢
12 OZ. BOTTLE
"I MAKE SURE EACH SWALLOW TASTES GOOD"

"And bring something nice for me!" the big man bellowed after them. He combed his thick beard, and chuckled hoarsely. He spun the automatic around his blunt forefinger.

It was exactly twenty-seven minutes later that the special freight roared into Dagger Cut. It was a long slash across a rockily barren ridge. The dazzling finger of the searchlight picked up spots of brilliance in the rock walls. Drifts like smoke sifted across it. That was the winnowing dust. The dust swirled under the wheels of the locomotive, sucked up high into the air so that the caboose of the train moved in a constant cloud of dirt particles. It sifted in little piles and eddies on the floor.

THE trainmen sat on the lurching benches and cursed behind handkerchiefs that covered mouth and nostrils . . . and accomplished nothing. The air was smoky with dust. Dagger Cut was full of it, swirling, choking clouds of it.

For perhaps thirty seconds, both locomotive and caboose were deep in Dagger Cut. Then the nose of the locomotive began to thrust out into the open, and down in the valley three miles ahead was the headlight of the waiting Springdale Special.

The locomotive engineer saw it on the siding and reached for the whistle cord.

Windows crashed in the caboose in that instant. Those same lop-sided black baseballs bounced to the floor.

In the cab of the engine, there was a sudden hail of the bombs. A full dozen had been hurled at the cab.

For a flickering moment, the locomotive was outlined in blue white fire. The caboose seemed to explode with it. Long tongues stabbed out of the windows. Then the all-pervading dust swallowed the light. Even the headlight blacked out. Raw, blinding steam spewed out of shattered pipes.

On the crest above Dagger Cut, a finger of light reached up into the air. Beside the Springdale Special, the bearded leader laughed again, nodding to himself.

"Everything's fine," he grunted. "You boys hand these dames over to Number One. Tell the pilot he can take off right away." He lifted his voice. "Soapy, get that crib cracked!"

The special freight's speed was dwindling. When it drifted to a halt beside the Springdale Special, the men who had tightened the handbrakes already had the doors of some of the cars open. . . . One of them ran toward the bearded man.

"There was armed guards in two of the cars," he yelled. "Somebody must of been tipped off. . . . No, hell, no trouble. We just tossed in a bomb."

"Hop to it!" the bearded pirate snarled. "We'll cut the loading time in half. Some more interference might come. Planes take off as loaded. Get the fires laid as soon as you finish with the first car."

The man saluted awkwardly, "Okay, LaFitte!"

Men moved at a heavy run with loads slung over their shoulders. They swarmed over the freight cars. LaFitte stood with an eye on everything at once, and shouted deep-chested orders. The gun was nervous in his fist, and every time a plane took off with a deep roar of powerful motors he grunted in satisfaction. He watched the streamers of flame from their exhausts as they slanted steeply toward the sky.

Suddenly his head cocked far back and he peered upward with narrowed eyes. He thought he heard a new motor sound high in the upper air. It was hard to tell, with all this shouting and running around him. He tried to make sure of the sound's location, and from nearby there came a low, rumbling explosion. The first freight car's benzine bath had been touched off. Red tongues of flame hungrily leaped upward over it.

LaFitte cursed explosively. Those

flames were a give-away if that was some prowling plane overhead there. Too late to worry about that now.

For a moment, LaFitte stood uncertainly. "Snap it up," he bellowed. "Five minutes more, then drop it and run for the planes. *Soapy!"*

From inside the express car, the safecracker's voice came to him faintly. "Just a few minutes more, Chief, and I got it in the bag!"

LaFitte rumbled curses and slouched swiftly toward the opposite side of the train, began to plough through the ankle-deep sand and dust toward the planes. In an hour or two, the wind would blot out the last traces of their presence here. If they had an hour or two. . . . LaFitte glowered at the upper air. Only a question of time before they were found out, anyway. Not that their finding out would be able to stop the raids. Pretty lucky so far. . . .

LaFitte stopped suddenly dead in his tracks and ripped out a searing oath.

There was machine-gun chatter in the upper air!

EVEN as he stared that welter of machine gun coughs was silenced and he heard a deeper, heavier cough . . . like a small cannon shot in the distance!

The next instant, there was a star of brilliant white and crimson flame there against the sky! The streamers of fire reached out and out into space, then died. But not before the stunned LaFitte made out the shattered fragments of one of his big cargo planes spangled against the flame!

LaFitte began to run through the heavy sand. His frantic voice reached out ahead of him. "Get those fighters into the air! Damn you, get into the air! Our cargo ships are being attacked!"

Even as he lifted his voice in the order, another of the heavy cargo ships began to roll. The brutal bellow of its motors drowned out all other sound. LaFitte roared futilely in the bedlam. He ran like a tank, fired his gun into the air. The cargo ship was fading into the night before he made himself heard. Then a voice acknowledged the order faintly. As LaFitte puffed onto the field, three small fast pursuit ships were already rolling across the sand. The thick, soft dust clung to their wheels.

Finally, they shook the dust clear and clawed into the heavens.

LaFitte cursed and shook his fists into the air. The red glow of the fire was spreading. Its glow reached out through the dead, snarled branches of the underbrush, threw lurid glare across the rutted sand of the landing field.

"Hurry, damn you!" LaFitte yelled. "Get that cargo aboard! They've spotted us!"

He tipped back his head to peer toward the heavens. The stars glittered coldly in a black sky. He could make out the faint fire glow of the cargo plane's exhausts. That was all.

Then, suddenly, there was that fiendish chatter of machine-guns again. It was like laughter, flat laughter, metallic and mocking. . . .

LaFitte could not possibly have heard it, but there was laughter like that in the high heavens at that moment!

CROUCHED forward beneath the transparent hood of his plane, the *Spider* dived to the kill! The ship quivered to the mounting vibration of the racing engines. At incredible speed, he flashed to the attack. The four machine guns were scarcely audible above the howling fury of the twin engines. Rapidly he overtook the next giant cargo plane. His tracers were biting into her tail now. He climbed well above his quarry, nosed down and sent the bullets probing toward the pilot's cabin. . . .

And suddenly, streaks of fire leaped from the tail of the great plane. It was not the flame of explosion, of flaming gas tanks, or of guns. It was like the blue-white agony of the flame that the *Spider* had glimpsed when the bomb exploded in Carlyle's factory. . . . He saw those flames, and then he was gazing at the memory of those spurts of fire that lingered upon his retinas. That was all. The cargo plane had leaped ahead like a bullet!

Wentworth blinked, shook his head. He glanced at his air-speed indicator. He was still in a power dive. The needle was shoving past the 500-mile mark . . . but that cargo plane was ripping away from him as if he were standing still!

The *Spider* peered toward his air speed indicator, frowning . . . and suddenly the glass of the instrument smashed! The dial dissolved into fragments!

And the *Spider* laughed and horsed back on the stick, and the blood drained from his head with the mighty pull of gravity. For a space of laboring heartbeats, everything blacked out before his eyes. Then, gradually, his vision cleared again. His ship was hanging on its propellers, climbing at an incredible angle.

Delicately, he levelled out, peered about him at the blackness of the night. Faintly below him, he could make out the roseate blur of exhaust stacks. Three ships had come up to attack him!

Wentworth laughed softly, eased the stick forward. He reached for the button trigger of the cannon, kicked a release for a parachute flare. Moments later, the brilliant glare of the magnesium blossomed out below him. It outlined the three black planes vividly for an instant . . . the instant the *Spider* needed!

The ship shuddered, yawed like a destroyer at the recoil of the cannon. The leading plane of the trio of pirate fighters exploded in a blast of crimson flame!

Then the remaining two planes had slipped into the darkness above the magnesium flare. Wentworth whipped his head about, but his eyes were blinded by the incredible white brilliance of the flare. He could see nothing. He jammed the throttles wide, pointed his nose upward. The motors howled out their song of power, and the tiny ship clawed for altitude.

It was at that moment the two pirates caught him in their cross-fire. They had looped apart, swung in together. Their tracers reached out for the *Spider's* ship. Fast as it was, it could not outfly bullets.

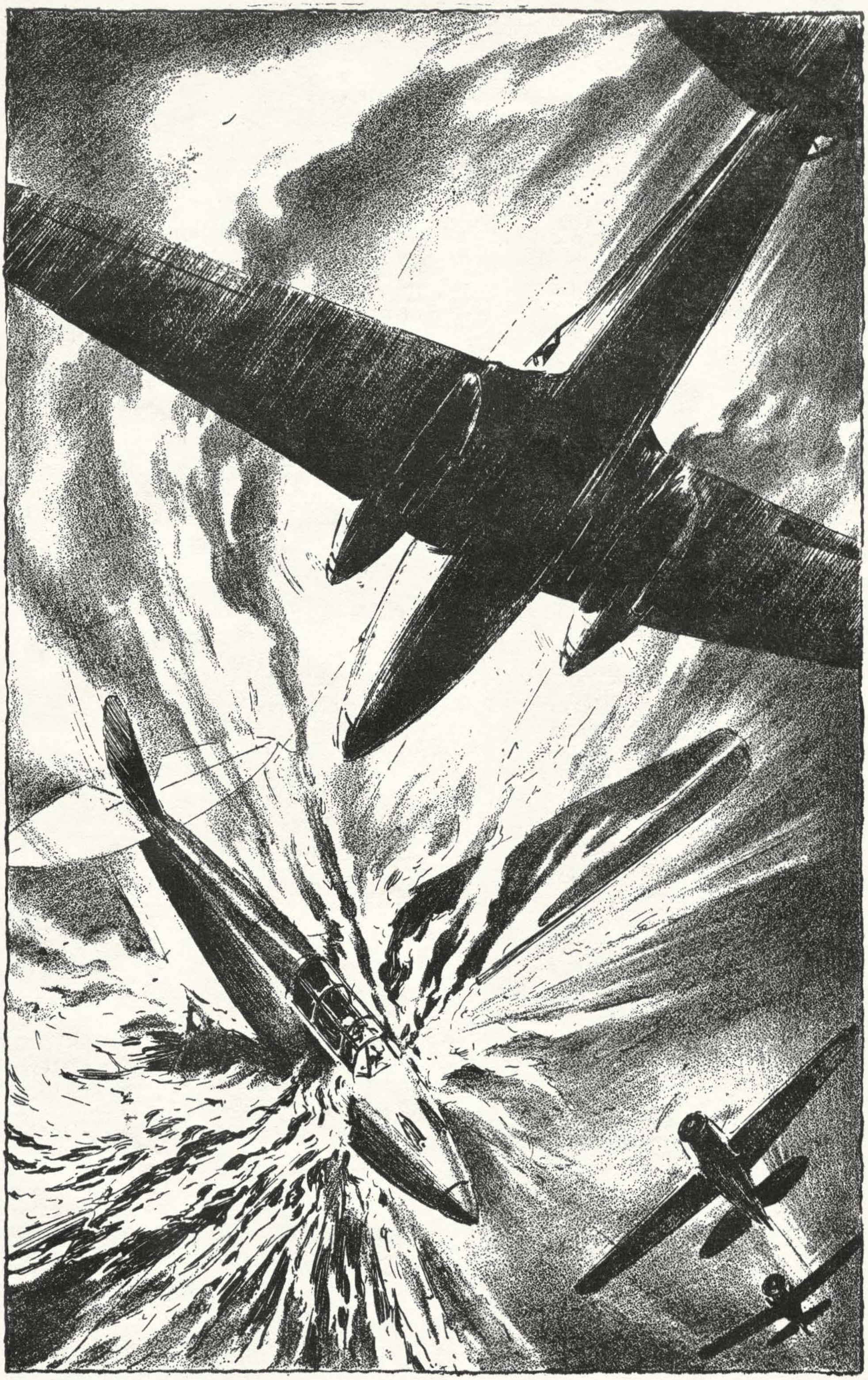
Wentworth kicked the ship into a vicious side-slip. The bullets missed the cockpit. They centered upon the right motor nacelle.

Instantly, the smooth, power whine began a lunatic scream. The plane vibrated, trembled. The right wing jerked as if endowed with a separate maniac life determined upon wresting itself free from the body.

With an oath, Wentworth cut the ignition on that motor. Too late! With a final, screaming fury, the motor nacelle ripped free of its mountings. It flew into space and carried away half the wing with it!

The *Spider* was helpless . . . and the pirate ships were diving again!

WENTWORTH cut the remaining motor. Even so, the impaired balance and lack of lifting surface hurled the



The pirate plane exploded in a blast of crimson flame.

plane into a violent spin. Calmly, Wentworth waited his chance, abandoning a rudder and stick gone sloppy in his hands.

The nose of the ship spun faster. The whole earth was brilliantly illuminated now by a kaleidoscopic holocaust that embraced the looted train, men were running like driven ants, and other ships taking off. Wentworth ripped back the cover of the cockpit, and leaped off into space!

The *Spider* was still three thousand feet above the earth when he jumped from the twisting plane. He hurled himself as far to the side as possible. He gripped his parachute ring, but did not yet pull it. As he tumbled through space, the two pirate fighters ripped past. Their guns still poured lead at his plunging ship, evidently determined to destroy it utterly.

The constant rain of bullets from the two diving planes was taking its toll. Flames burst suddenly from beneath the cowling of the *Spider's* doomed ship. The hurricane of the descent whipped them into furious heat.

But the plane still hurtled straight toward the landing field! Nothing that those hornet fighters could accomplish would turn it aside from its path of destruction!

The plane struck squarely in the center of the field. There was no pirate transport beneath it, but it burst with a geyser of flame. One of the ships suddenly was afire. . . .

With a small, cold smile on his lips, Wentworth pulled the ring of his parachute. He did not think there was anyone on the field of destruction now that would be able to think of scanning the skies for him. The fighters were below him, circling to a landing. . . .

In the darkness, the push of the wind swept Wentworth entirely across the railroad tracks before his eager feet could reach the earth. He sprawled, slashed loose the shrouds and then unbuckled the harness. His arms crossed on his chest . . . and when his hands reappeared, each gripped an automatic!

The *Spider* slipped silently through the night to the attack!

From the ditch beside the right-of-way, he sent his cold gaze probing the length of the train. Flames leaped brilliantly from a dozen of the freight cars. The stench of benzine was on the air . . . but not a man was in sight!

Wentworth swore softly and leaped up to the level of the right-of-way. He plunged under a freight car not yet in flames, peered toward the passenger train on the siding. No flames had touched it yet, but as he watched, a man clambered to the roof with a five gallon can slung to his shoulders!

Wentworth lifted his left hand automatic and squeezed the trigger. The man's head snapped back between his shoulders and he pitched backward to the earth. Through a long minute, the *Spider* waited, deadly in his pit of darkness. No other man climbed to the roof . . . but suddenly a door slid open in the mail car!

Toward that spot swiveled the avenging eyes and guns of the *Spider* . . . but for the moment he held his fire. Above the crackle and roar of the fire, he caught the deep throb of motors. The night was roaring with a dozen of them. Glistening like red-shot silver fish, the ships lifted one by one into the night from the field beyond the trains. A man ran excitedly toward the mail coach, gesturing, shouting. Wentworth could not hear the words, but he saw the man in the doorway turn and shout into the interior.

Plainly, one ship was waiting for these men and the loot they would bring!

WENTWORTH laughed softly, and his two guns spoke as one. The man in the doorway was pounded back out of sight. The second caught the bullet between his shoulders and was driven against the side of the train. His hands clawed against the metal. His back arched incredibly. Then his knees gave and he went down, kicking up the sand.

The *Spider* slipped from beneath the car and ran swiftly toward the mail car. Another man was peering furtively out of the entrance.

"Hurry!" Wentworth yelled at him. "The Chief ain't going to wait much longer!"

The man stared at Wentworth, turned away. Wentworth heard his voice, thin and frightened. "For cripe's sake, Soapy, ain't you got that crib open yet?"

While he stood, head turned away like that, Wentworth vaulted into the mail car itself. There were only these two men; the one close at hand, and the other who crouched in the circle of a flashlight before a small strong-box. As Wentworth straightened, the man called Soapy swung open the door of the safe, and began to scoop sheaths of greenbacks into a satchel.

"Won't be a minute now," he called in a cheerful whine. "Geez, I thought I never would get this damned crib open."

He straightened and, suddenly, a gun leaped into his fist. "God!" he yelped. *"The Spider!"*

He slammed a bullet at Wentworth, and the guard nearest the door sprang back across the car and whipped his revolver into his fist. Wentworth stood as calm as judgment silhouetted in the open doorway. His two guns swiveled a little, and he fired once with each one.

Soapy was driven back across the safe. The other guard sat down, bent double like a contortionist. Neither of them moved after that. Wentworth was already in movement as they fell. His plans were made even as he fired.

He knew Soapy Nixon as a smart safecracker, and Soapy had run into the *Spider* before . . . and been spared. That was how he had recognized him even without the tell-tale cape. But Wentworth's movements were lightning swift now. As he sprang toward Soapy, Wentworth was stripping off his clothing!

From the amount of the loot thrust into the bag, Wentworth was pretty sure that the last plane would not take off without at least a report from Soapy. There would be a report, all right! In a very few minutes, Soapy would run to the airport with a bag full of loot.

But only in externals would it be the same Soapy! Within those pinchback clothes, behind the twisted, placating face of Soapy would lurk the cold and bitter justice of . . . the *Spider!*

IT WAS a swift and haphazard job of disguise that Wentworth performed in the mail car. Things would be hurried, and the plane would fly dark. There would be time enough later to complete the details of his make-up! Three minutes after he had entered the car, Wentworth climbed down again and carried the stripped body of Soapy, and his own clothing, toward a blazing freight car on the next track. It was not a thing he liked to do, but Soapy would never feel the flames, and it was necessary that the last trace of Soapy be destroyed!

Then Wentworth snatched up the bag of loot, ducked under the motionless passenger train and raced through the heavy sand. From a distance he saw a man running toward him. When the man spotted Wentworth, he stopped and gestured violently, then ran back. Wentworth tossed the bag over his shoulder, and

he sent his mind back over what he knew about Soapy. He remembered that Soapy had once been shot through the thigh and limped on his left foot. Also he had a trick of hunching one shoulder forward a little.

Wentworth smiled thinly behind the sketchy disguise of Soapy. If he ran like that, in Soapy's clothing, and carrying the loot Soapy was to bring, he thought that he could escape immediate detection!

He reached the crest of the rise toward the field, where they could see him from the one plane. He turned and fired three shots back toward the motionless train, then he hurried on.

"Quick!" he shouted above the mutter of the idling motors. "Quick! Some of those guys on the train. . . ."

He hurled the loot before him through the open doorway, scrambled up. A hand grapped him by the nap of the neck and shook him, and Wentworth glimpsed out of his eye corners the giant bulk, the heavily bearded face of LaFitte!

"You rat!" LaFitte snarled. "You kept me waiting!"

Wentworth spoke with Soapy's whining voice. "It was a tough crib, boss, and some guys come out of the train and started shooting. The others all got it. I had to run for it. . . ."

What LaFitte would have answered was lost as the motors began to roar at top pitch. He tossed Wentworth aside, caught up the bag of loot and threw himself into a cushioned seat. Wentworth saw him brace himself, lash a strap tightly across his body. He cringed forward and did the same thing himself.

Moments later, the plane lifted sluggishly into the air and began to climb steadily. Wentworth's eyes were hidden beneath the weight of his lids. Laughter pushed at his locked teeth.

It was a signal favor that LaFitte was rendering him. LaFitte was carrying the *Spider* to the hidden headquarters of the pirates!

One man against more than a hundred pirates, of course, a hundred killers! The *Spider* knew that, but it did not check the wild impulse to laughter that squeezed his lungs.

It was no wonder that men called the *Spider* mad!

CHAPTER SEVEN

Fort Hell

A SHREWD plan was taking form in Wentworth's mind even as the plane struggled for altitude. His eyes burned toward LaFitte who sat four feet away. Aside from the man, or men, whoever was in the pilot's compartment, there were only himself, LaFitte and one other of the pirates aboard.

Suppose the plane landed . . . *without LaFitte!*

In the resultant confusion, it should be easy for the *Spider* to cripple all the planes and summon the forces of law and order to the pirate hideout!

Without LaFitte!

Wentworth weighed his automatic on his palm, carefully conned the chances. A sudden surge of the ship sank him deep in the cushions on which he sat. He heard the piles of cargo, strapped to the floor, sag against their braces . . . and the motors were cut out!

Instead of the motors, he heard a soft, rumbling hiss that seemed to come from the rear of the ship. He peered downward out of the window. The earth, far below, was sweeping past at an incredible rate . . . and the plane was still climbing at tremendous speed.

This then was the secret of the pirates' widespread raids and their quick disappearances. No wonder the police had not suspected looting! These planes were actually equipped with rocket tubes, powered with that queer blue-white explosive that was like electricity!

He could not even estimate its speed, but he knew that it had pulled away from his own 500-mile-an-hour power dive as if his speedy little plane had been standing still!

Wentworth's lips closed grimly. This made it absolutely necessary that he strike at once! With such a weapon of attack and escape as this fabulously fast ship, the pirates would be virtually impregnable . . . except by being tracked to their lair!

Wentworth half lifted to his feet, and then he saw what LaFitte was doing! The pirate leader reached into a compartment beside him, and took out a small microphone. He lifted it to his bearded lips.

"Five o'clock report," his voice reached Wentworth faintly. "All okay, Chief, and homeward bound."

LaFitte put the microphone back into its compartment, settled himself as if for sleep. His brutal hands were clenched upon the sack of stolen money. It rustled faintly under his hands.

Wentworth settled back in his seat, and his eyes stared widely into the night. Those few brief words that LaFitte had spoken made it necessary for him to recast all his plans. For that report revealed more truly than any deductions that LaFitte was only a lieutenant to the real leader of the pirates!

The automatic slipped back into Wentworth's holster and, instead, he drew out a small mirror and the make-up kit without which he never went into battle. It would do no good to destroy LaFitte and so alarm the real leader. The *Spider* must make a clean sweep!

And that meant he must pass muster as Soapy among men who knew the whining safe-cracker!

The sun peered above the horizon like a blood-shot eye before Wentworth had finished his careful work upon the make-up, and he became aware that the plane was dropping. It left the sunlight behind in the high air, plunged through twilight and into night. Up in the stratosphere where they had flown it was already day, but here the shadows still clung.

The soft rumble of the rockets was broken by the coughing of the plane motors as they were started again. When they had warmed sufficiently, the rockets cut out and the ship once more maneuvered as an ordinary plane. Below him, Wentworth made out a lane of red lights; blue-white floodlights showed a runway of sand. It leaped up toward them, the motors cut . . . and the big plane trundled on earth.

WENTWORTH'S eyes probed the darkness as the floodlights cut out, but he could see nothing save the hint of low-rolling sand dunes. The plane rolled through a wide gate in a thick wall, rumbled into a hangar and halted. Here there were a few lights, and Wentworth saw that there were fully twenty planes, parked row on close row in the far end of the hangar.

There was time for no more than that. LaFitte was on his feet, stumping toward the door. He ignored Wentworth and the other pirate. As the door was thrown open, Wentworth stared past him. Waiting for LaFitte was a single man. He wore a red wool knit cap cocked over one eye, and there was a scarlet sash wound about his hips.

"You just made it, LaFitte," he said, and there was mockery about his lips. "Another five minutes and it will be daylight."

LaFitte rumbled a curse and Wentworth, using Soapy's cringing pace, moved toward the door behind him. LaFitte towered over the man in the red sash.

"That's my business, Spurr," he snapped. "Have you tended to yours as well?"

Spurr lifted a hand in salute, but there was mockery even in that gesture. "The ten cargo planes took off an hour ago," he reported crisply. "They'll be in Europe by noon."

Wentworth let his head sag to hide the quick interest that sprang into his eyes. So that was the method used for disposing of the loot! Expensive war goods was stolen, flown directly to Europe by these super-planes that clawed the thin air of the stratosphere! Yes, it was well that he had not destroyed LaFitte on the plane. He would have to choose a time when all the pirates were in the fort!

The sun was lightening the air above now and Wentworth's covert eyes took in the scene. He felt a species of shocked amazement. He was in a perfect fortress, it seemed. Another glance, and he recognized the truth. This was indeed a fort . . . an abandoned outpost of the United States Army from the days of the Indian wars! Such a fort could only be located in the depths of some desert region; or in the midst of that new desert, the American Dust Bowl!

Grudgingly, Wentworth acknowledged the cleverness of the move. There would usually be a screen of blowing dust over all this area, to blind any eyes that might peer down from above. As long as the pirates operated exclusively at night, kept under cover in the daytime, they would be extraordinarily safe!

"Soapy," LaFitte's voice rasped suddenly. "Bring that money to headquarters. We'll just make sure you didn't take a cut!"

He tossed the canvas sack at Wentworth and went striding off. The man called Spurr strode jauntily at his side. There was swagger in the man, Spurr, a certain sly truculence that Wentworth recognized. Lieutenant Spurr fancied himself as boss of the outfit, but he was still a little afraid of LaFitte!

Wentworth smiled with secret lips as he caught up the canvas sack and hurried after them with Soapy's limp. He made a swift examination of the bag. It had been opened all right since he surrendered it to LaFitte! Apparently, the leader of the pirates was not above filching some of the loot for his own pockets—and blaming the theft on some convenient scapegoat.

In this case, the scapegoat would be Soapy!

Wentworth pressed his arm down upon the automatic holstered beneath it. He hoped it wouldn't be necessary to use it. His eyes were tight with thought. If LaFitte intended to put the blame on him, it argued either that Soapy had not been long with the outfit; or was unpopular with the other pirates. From his knowledge of Soapy's cringing eagerness to please, he doubted the latter.

" . . . had to discipline one of the men," Wentworth caught a phrase of Spurr's speech. "The fool was meddling with another guy's woman."

A hoarse cry caught Wentworth's ear, and he twisted his head about. Beneath a shed, a man was strapped to an upright post. His voice was a dry croak, the words almost unintelligible.

"Water!" he whispered drily. "LaFitte . . . God's sake . . . water!"

LaFitte turned his head and there was a brutal smile on his bearded lips. He laughed. "Take some water to him," he ordered. "Almost to him, that is. Say about a yard away."

LAFITTE bellowed a shout of laughter at the brightening sky, punched open a sagging wooden door of the fort and stumped into the cool darkness within. Lights blazed at his touch. Wentworth caught his breath in amazement. The big long room that had been a mess hall long ago was furnished as lavishly as a sultan's palace! LaFitte flung himself upon a deep divan. Spurr took a cigar from a humidor on the mahogany table and leisurely set about lighting it.

"Come here, Soapy," LaFitte ordered, "and count the money out on the table. I know how much there ought to be there, and if you've stolen a cent . . . well, we have methods of discipline here!"

Wentworth cringed toward the table, whined in Soapy's tremulous eagerness. "Sure, now, LaFitte, it's all there!" he said. "Why wouldn't it be? I gave it to you the minute I got to the plane, and you've had it ever since!"

LaFitte belched out a roar of rage and towered to his feet. He lifted a clenched fist . . . and somewhere nearby, a clock began to tinkle the hour. LaFitte started, glanced at an expensive watch he drew from his vest.

"Watch him, Spurr," he snapped. "I'll be back in a moment!"

He strode off toward the end of the long room, through a door which he closed carefully behind him.

Wentworth spat out a whining curse. "He ain't going to frame me," he said to Spurr. "Look, search me, will you, Spurr? I ain't been nowhere except on the plane, and walking here. You know that. If there's any money gone, LaFitte's got it!"

Spurr tilted his head back. He stood on braced legs, the sash jaunty about his snow-white clothing, shirt open at the throat. Nonsensically, a line of verse ran through Wentworth's mind. *"It is, it is a glorious thing, to be a pirate king. . . ."* Spurr was playing his part to the fullest.

"Is that a fact now, Soapy," he drawled. "Of course, you being so new around here, you don't know we kill men for accusing LaFitte of things like that!"

Soapy cringed toward Spurr. "Search me, that's all!" he pleaded. "He's trying to hang something on me I'd get killed for, and I ain't taking it, see? I ain't taking it!"

His mind was racing as he approached Spurr. His guess that Soapy had recently arrived at the fortress was true! That was a break if he had to continue the pose for a while. He must at least wait until those planes returned from Europe.

Spurr took a single long stride and caught Wentworth's wrist. With a dextrous twist, he had it thrust up high between Wentworth's shoulders. It hurt, and it was Soapy's nature to whine. Wentworth whined. With a swift hand, Spurr patted over Wentworth's body. He laughed and yanked out the two heavy automatics, tossed them to the table.

"A two-gun man, are you, Soapy?" he jeered.

He whipped out a half-pint bottle and started to toss it toward the table also. It held about five ounces of dirty brown oily liquid.

Wentworth screamed, "Cripes, don't, Spurr, unless you want the whole fort blown up!"

Spurr cursed harshly, the bottle held with sudden tenderness in his hand. "You damned fool!" he whispered. "What is it?"

Wentworth giggled, feeling the strain lessen on his arm.

"Just a little good old soup, Spurr," Wentworth said. "Or, as you might say, *nitro-glycerine.*"

Spurr thrust the bottle back into Wentworth's pocket, cuffed him viciously across the face with his knuckles. "You damned fool!" he snarled. "Carrying stuff like that around!"

Wentworth twisted Soapy's loose lips into a jeering smile. He put his hand in his pocket and fondled the bottle. "You didn't find no money, Spurr?"

Spurr looked at him with narrowed greenish eyes and didn't answer. The cigar was tilted up. He took it from between his teeth slowly, mouthed out the thin blue smoke.

"LaFitte doesn't steal from his men," he said slowly. "If there is money missing, you took it. We'll give you a shot, and tie you to a post. It takes about two hours to die . . . *of thirst.*"

WENTWORTH'S eyes tightened at memory of that man tied to a post outside, but before he could speak, LaFitte came striding back into the room. He was only half a head taller than the jaunty Spurr, but he looked twice the lieutenant's size. He shuffled like a bear, and there was a wild animal's strength in the thickness of those rolling shoulders. He, too, had a cigar between his teeth. He spat out thick folds of smoke when he spoke.

"Count the money, Soapy!" he ordered.

It was apparent that he was in a red-eyed rage. Wentworth moved warily toward the table where the canvas sack lay. Spurr had as good as told him that he didn't dare oppose LaFitte. And yet the man wanted LaFitte's job. No doubt of that.

Spurr said, carelessly, "I took Soapy's guns away from him, just for luck."

LaFitte grunted, "Start counting the money, Soapy!"

Wentworth said, sullenly, "I ain't touching that money. I put everything that was in the safe in that bag. I give the bag to you. I ain't having nothing more to do with it, see?"

LaFitte let out a roar of anger, and at that moment, a door in the side wall of the room was batted open. A girl ran through it, slammed the door and set her shoulders against it. She was panting. Her golden hair streamed about her shoulders; the neck of her dress had been torn. Wentworth just choked down an incredulous oath.

It was Dr. Brown's nurse!

The girl stumbled forward, "Oh, please, Mr. LaFitte!" she said. "That awful man . . . oh please!"

LaFitte stood rigidly, staring at the girl. He didn't speak, and Wentworth's narrowed eyes hid his thoughts. He had set Nita and Jackson to follow the coffin in which the nurse was confined. That had been in New York, not more than a half hour before he had taken off in the fast little plane. Yet, the nurse had reached here before him!

Obviously, there had been a stratoplane in New York, ready for its cargo of captured women. Wentworth shook his head. Impossible, for Nita or Jackson to have followed in any plane they could command. Impossible . . . *unless Nita had been captured!*

A tightness in his chest robbed Wentworth of breath for a moment. No, there was no reason to think that. None at all.

The tightness stayed in his chest.

LaFitte said, amiably, "It is forbidden for any woman to come into this room."

The girl ran toward him, hands held out in prayer. "I didn't know," she whispered. "Oh, please. . . ."

She ran to LaFitte and LaFitte put out a hand and set it in her hair. He lifted her off her feet and began to slap her, hard, jarring blows with his thick palm!

Wentworth tried to steel himself not to interfere in the torture. It was more important that he maintain the rôle of Soapy than that he save this one girl. The fate of thousands of people actually depended on his survival, on his destroying LaFitte and these pirates. Wentworth told himself that, deliberately.

He said, "LaFitte, let that girl go!"

La Fitte's head snapped around. His mouth gaped incredulously amid the thick bristle of his beard.

Wentworth made his shoulders cringe, "I can have any woman I want," he whined, "and I want her. I always did like them round and blonde like that.

That is, if you don't want her, LaFitte!"

LaFitte dropped his hold on the nurse and she sank to her knees on the floor. She was half dazed by the heavy blows. Blood trickled from her nostrils and fell unnoticed to the white softness of her dress.

"If I don't want her," LaFitte said softly.

Wentworth nodded his head eagerly. "Un-hunh! She looks nice and I'll take her off your hands."

LaFitte was a big animal creeping around the table, a big cat. His lips grinned back from his teeth, and there was a smile crinkling his eye corners. There was no doubt that he was enjoying himself.

"You thieving little rat," he said gently. "You killed the men working with you so you could steal part of the money. And now you want a woman. A big, bad pirate aren't you, Soapy?"

WENTWORTH shrank back from the man's approach. He made his eyes flutter in apparent fright. He hoped his eyes weren't too happy. If this beast came near enough. . . .

"Now, LaFitte," he whined in Soapy's voice. "I didn't mean no harm. I just like the dame's looks, see? But if you want her, you take her, see? Only I ain't no thieving rat, and I didn't take no money. Like I said, you had it—"

With a roar, LaFitte sprang on him. His thick palm thudded against the side of Wentworth's head. He seized an arm and twisted it as Spurr had done . . . and Wentworth let him do it. He was sane and cool. The time wasn't ripe yet to defy LaFitte. Spurr might welcome LaFitte's death, but he would execute the man who killed him!

Wentworth whined a protest, dropped to his knees with a whimper of pain. Spurr laughed. His voice was jeering.

"Go ahead and break his arm, LaFitte,"

"Come Into My Parlor"
said the Spider to the Fly

But the Fly paid no heed, for he was Asmodeus, King of the Darkness, Leader of the Night-Demons—the man who stole from the blood-red pages of Europe's cruelest dictators a brand new means of setting the entire Underworld against Civilization!

Who but Asmodeus could enlist the services of Lilith, modern likeness of ancient Babylonia's beautiful and sinister Princess of Evil?

And, after civilization's last defenses against Crime have fallen, who—save Richard Wentworth, alias the *Spider*—could muster the stark courage or the brilliance of strategy necessary to stem the tide of this mad monster's murder minions? . . . You owe it to yourself to buy the September issue of the *Spider Magazine* to read

MASTER OF THE NIGHT-DEMONS
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Grant Stockbridge

THE SPIDER MASTER OF MEN!
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he urged. "It's true we had to shoot the last safe-cracker after you broke his arm. But we can always get another one."

Wentworth was conscious of LaFitte's coarse breathing above him, but the pressure on his arm eased a little.

"It don't do any good to have a safe-cracker," LaFitte said harshly, "when he takes half the loot for himself!"

"Why not break his leg instead?" Spurr asked, still jeering. "He don't open safes with his feet, and he can't run away before we need him tomorrow night."

LaFitte chuckled. He grabbed at Wentworth's foot. Wentworth felt the almost imperceptible loosening of the grip on his wrist. With a quick twist, he freed himself and danced backward across the room away from LaFitte.

LaFitte bellowed with anger, whipped out a gun. Wentworth took out the bottle of nitro-glycerine!

"Go ahead and shoot!" he snarled at LaFitte, and he still held to Soapy's cringing whine. "Go ahead . . . and I'll blow the whole damned fort to kingdom come! This here is nitro-glycerine in this bottle!"

LaFitte checked his rush and, above his beard, his cheeks were suddenly pale. "You damned fool!" he swore.

"Sure, I'm a fool!" Wentworth hurled back at him. "You shoot me, and you'll see. I hired out to this outfit, but ain't nobody pushing me around, see?"

Wentworth's eyes were keen and alert as they flicked over the room. Spurr was watching him with narrowed, insolent gaze. There was a faint smile on his thin lips. Suddenly, LaFitte began to laugh. He threw back his head and bellowed laughter at the ceiling, thrust his gun away.

"It's all right, Soapy," he guffawed. "It's all right. We was just hazing you, like we do everybody what comes here. Wanted to see if you got guts. You got guts all right. Come on, Soapy, drink up. They're on me. And take the woman, if you want her. They're free!"

"Wentworth let a slow smile cringe across his lips. "Ain't nobody pushing me around," he said. He kept the nitro bottle held as high as his shoulder. "Just dropping it this far will blow it up," he warned.

LaFitte shrugged, and turned his back on him. He kicked the girl viciously as he went past her, and she crumpled to the floor with a moan. LaFitte picked up the bag of money, jerked his head at Spurr and strode toward the door at the end of the room. When he had vanished, Wentworth limped toward Spurr.

"Thanks for backing me up, in there," he whispered.

Spurr slapped him across the mouth! His ring cut flesh! "Speak to me when you're spoken to," he said thinly. "Otherwise, keep your mouth shut!"

HE TURNED his back on Wentworth and swaggered across the room toward the door through which LaFitte had vanished. Wentworth's lips twisted slightly. He stood for a long minute in the middle of the room, with the nitro bottle lifted shoulder high. Afterward, he holstered his two automatics from the table. He limped toward the cowering nurse.

"Come along before you get hell knocked out of you again," he snarled at her.

The girl climbed hopelessly to her feet. She staggered after him toward the door, then out into the shadow of the roof overhang. Wentworth realized that he had no idea at all where his quarters were. He caught a snatch of drunken song from a low, long building nearby and turned that way. A woman screamed. Over under the shed, the man who had been bound up was sagging in his ropes. It took only a glance to know that he was already dead.

Dead of thirst within two hours after some injection had been made! Spurr had said, "We'll give you a shot . . . !"

It was fiendish; horrible. It was piratical. . . .

Overhead, the sun blazed in a cloudless sky like brass. Dust scurried with a faint rustling across the baked clay of the quadrangle. The dust was everywhere. It formed a haze between earth and sun. It gritted between the teeth, rimmed eyelids, strangled the nostrils. The heat struck like a sledge-hammer.

Wentworth turned toward the girl. "Go to my place and stay there!" he ordered gruffly.

The girl lifted a timid face, attempted a smile. "You . . . stopped him from beating me," she whispered.

Wentworth snarled at her in Soapy's voice. "That's my business. Go on now. Get. I got things to do."

The girl clung to her smile. "I don't know where your place is," she said.

"Then find it!" Wentworth snapped. "Everybody knows where Soapy Nixon hangs out. And mind you stay there, or else!"

"Soapy Nixon," she whispered. She turned and limped toward the dying sounds of revelry. The pirates were tired after their night's work.

Wentworth watched her go, then slowly he went toward another building. He had to find out if there were any prisoners here besides the girl; what the armament of the fort was . . . and about the job that Spurr had said was scheduled for tomorrow night! He could find his quarters now by locating the girl. . . .

Wentworth did not spend much time in inspecting the fort, but he was sure by now that Nita was not here. A guard warned him that he could not show himself in the quadrangle during daylight hours. Night-time, there was a complete blackout. . . . Wentworth nodded and limped toward what he took for the bar room. He was right. A long low room, that once had been a barracks for soldiers held scattered tables now. A half dozen men were seated around a table, dealing stud poker. Another leaned on the bar.

Wentworth dropped into a chair beside the poker game. Two of the men glanced at him, grunted greetings.

"Room for one more," the dealer grinned. "How about it, Soapy?"

Wentworth smiled cringingly as Soapy always smiled. He knew the croak and his reputation thoroughly, as he made it his business to know many characters of the Underworld. Soapy had a reputation for miserliness.

"I don't want to take your money," Wentworth said placatingly. "I'll just watch."

The dealer grunted contemptuously, and presently Wentworth began to brag, as Soapy always did.

"Me and LaFitte," he said, "was just making plans for tomorrow night. Going to be an even bigger haul than last night, and I brought in plenty. I told LaFitte I'd have to get a bigger cut after this, on account of I bring in more money. Ain't everybody can tickle open a crib like me! Ain't nobody else can open 'em like I do!"*

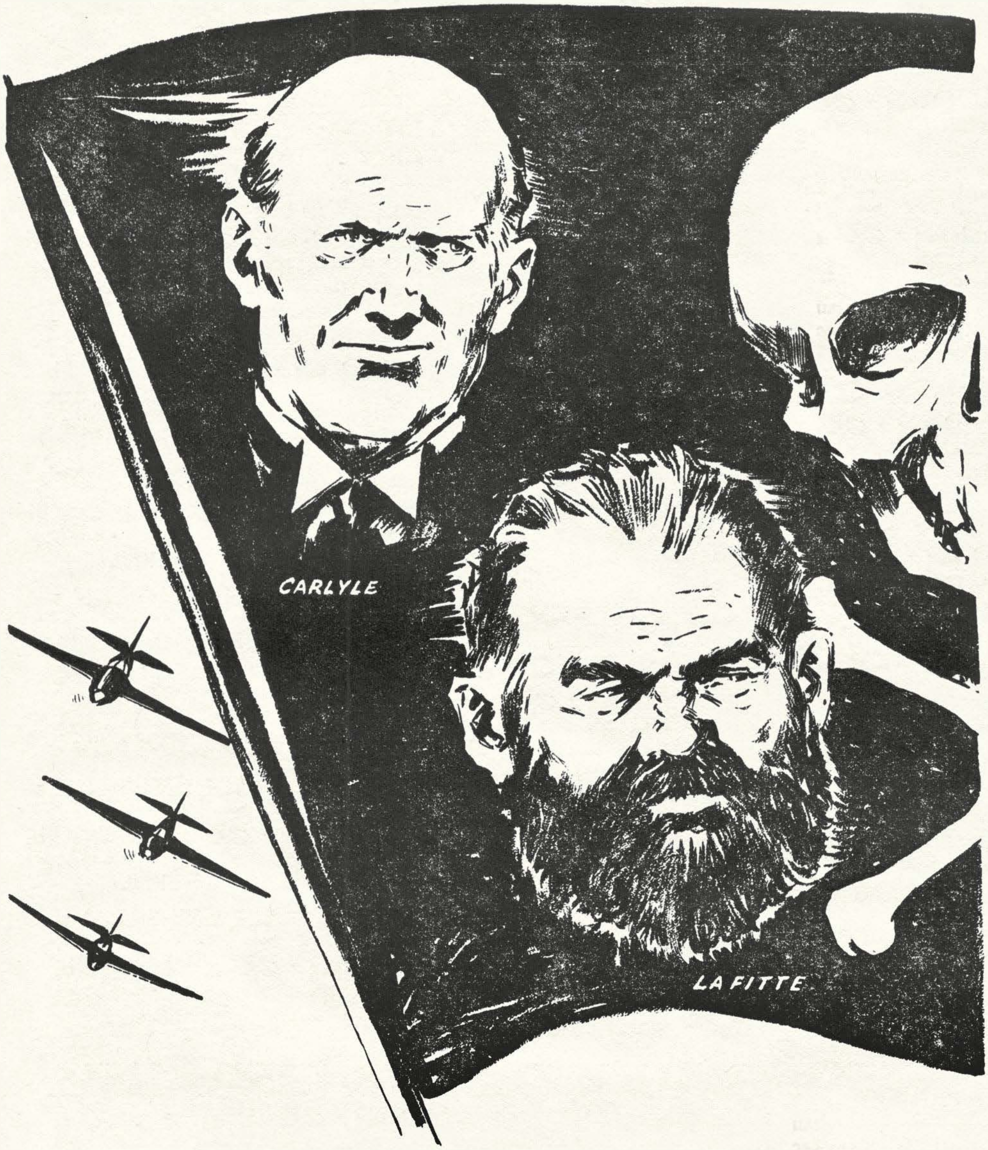
"You and Lafitte!" The dealer spat on the floor. "Put in a good word for me, Soapy!"

The men around the table laughed raucously. Wentworth said, angrily. "All right! All right! Ain't none of you knows what we're doing tomorrow night!"

THE dealer spat again. "Come off it, Soapy. We all know we're going to knock over the *Mesopotamia* tomorrow

---

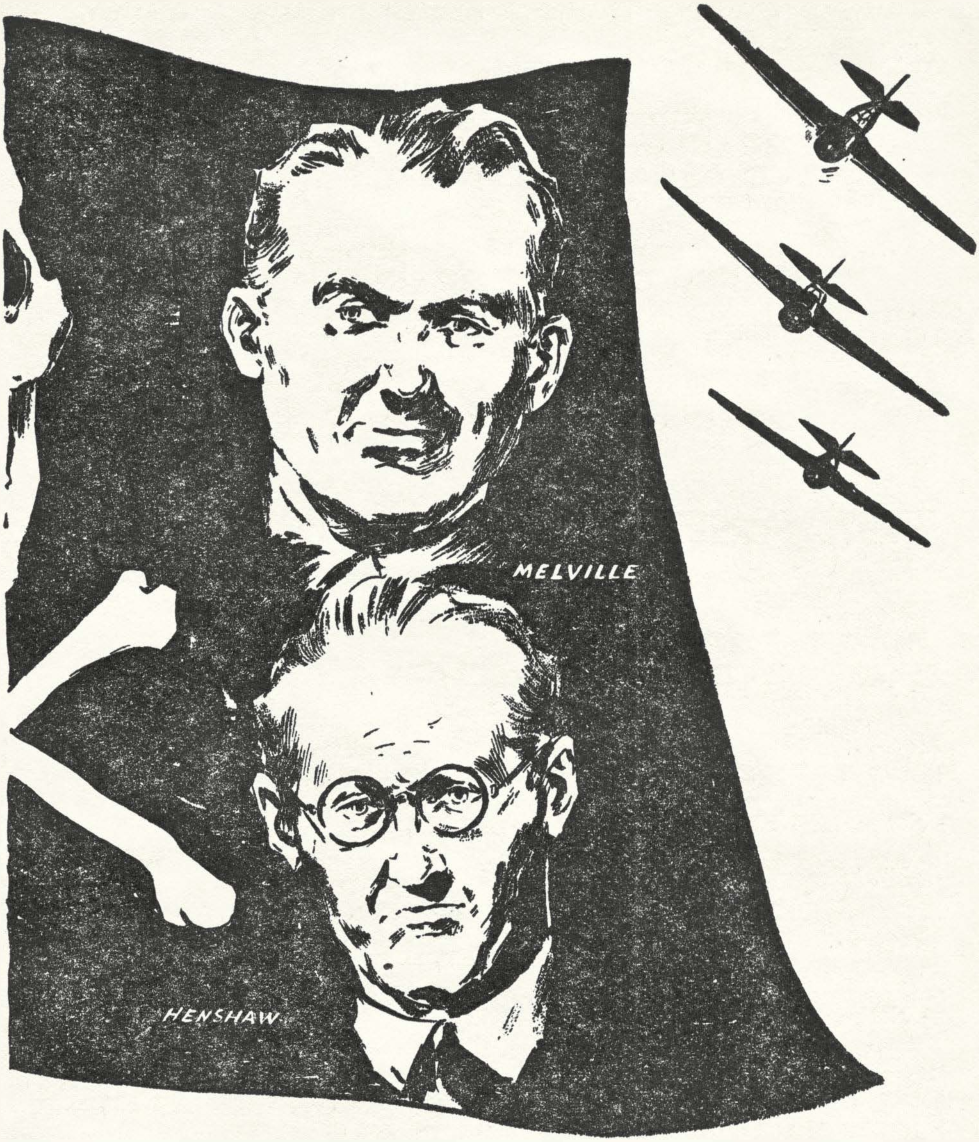
***NOTE:** **Wentworth was in no danger in making this boast. When, sickened with the failure of courts to conquer crime, he had determined upon the crusades of the *Spider*, Wentworth had schooled himself in every talent which he conceived might help him. As part of this, he apprenticed himself to the world's most skilled locksmith, for a period of three years. No safe had ever balked the *Spider* for long.**



night. And you damned well better get your fingers oiled up for that safe, or I'll personally slice them off. There ought to be five grand apiece for us in the box. Now look, Soapy, you're disturbing my concentration. Trot along and brag to your girl friend. Maybe she'll swallow it."

The dealer jerked his head toward a door alongside the bar, and Wentworth masked his eyes with his lids. His thoughts were racing. The *Mesopotamia* was one of the largest passenger ships on the Pacific runs. She would carry a huge cargo, apparently millions in the safe, if each man of the pirates rated five thousand dollars! It made no difference to the pirates that she would undoubtedly carry several hundred passengers also! It was easy to kill a few hundred people at sea!

Wentworth shoved to his feet. He had found out what he wanted to know. "To hell with you!" he snarled at the poker players. "You're just a bunch of muscle mugs. LaFitte knows I'm his best man!"



He limped off toward the door the dealer had indicated with a jerk of his head.

He found it gave on a corridor that led past the doors of many small rooms . . . officer's quarters once. Most of the doors swung open. Presently, he found the room where the nurse sat huddled upon a chair. Her head was in her hands, and when she lifted her face it was streaked with tears.

She sprang to her feet, once more achieved her tremulous smile. She had tidied her hair and pinned up the rents in her torn and badly dishevelled dress.

"I . . . I did what you told me, Soapy," she whispered.

Wentworth closed the door and pallor crept up the girl's bruised cheeks. She put a hand behind her against the wall. There was pity in Wentworth's eyes, but he could tell this girl nothing. It would not be safe. Knowing nothing would be better for her if, falling under suspicion himself, he should be seized. She might thus escape involvement—or torture.

"What is your name?" he asked quietly.

"Marion," she told him. "Marian Dawes."

Wentworth nodded. "Quit screwing up your shoulders and acting afraid." He put Soapy's snarl in his voice. "I ain't never had to push no dame around yet, and I ain't likely to start now. Keep quiet. I gotta sleep."

Wentworth threw himself down on the lower of the two bunks fastened against the wall, closed his eyes. Under lowered lids, he saw the girl's fear relax. She half reached out a hand toward him, and her smile turned gentle.

"Thank you, Soapy," she whispered.

Wentworth snarled, "Keep quiet, can't you?" He flopped over toward the wall, but not to sleep yet despite the drag of weariness upon his mind. He would be able to count on the girl to a certain extent, and he would need every atom of help he could get before he was through. LaFitte would be out to destroy him at the first opportunity. And Wentworth's hands were more or less tied. He could not strike now until he knew the identity of the man over LaFitte!

There was no question at all now that LaFitte was merely a figurehead. LaFitte's interruption of the baiting of Soapy Nixon at the striking of the clock proved that finally. He had left the room in order to report once more to the leader! Apparently, those reports had to be made at stipulated intervals, possibly every hour. No one else seemed aware of that fact, unless it were Spurr.

All of which meant that he must wait, that he must risk the return of some man who knew Soapy too intimately to be fooled by the impersonation.

Upon one thing he was determined. He would make sure that authorities were warned of the fate that awaited the *Mesopotamia!*

With that decided upon, Wentworth thrust all worry and planning from his brain. That in itself was a feat of willpower beyond the ability of ordinary men. The *Spider* slept. . . .

FIVE times during the course of the long, hot day, Wentworth awoke, after the manner of men who live in danger. Twice, Marian Dawes was dozing in the chair, and started awake in terror. When he awoke the third time, she had crawled into the upper bunk. Wentworth's lips curved in a gentle smile. The poor kid was terrified. The piercing eyes of the *Spider* softened. Nita would be worrying about him, but it could not be helped. Too dangerous to communicate now. . . .

When Wentworth awoke the final time, Marian was standing timidly beside the bed, and he held in her hands a cup of steaming coffee, a plate of food. Her smile was bright, but there was still pleading in her eyes.

"I—I thought you might be hungry," she said. Her eyes seemed to say, *"I'll do anything for you, if only. . ."*

Wentworth grunted Soapy's surly acknowledgement of the service. "Gang up yet?" he asked, and heard her affirmative only dimly.

"There's a big celebration tonight," she said, rapidly. "LaFitte has posted a big notice in the bar room. According to the radio, the *Spider* tried to stop them last night. And the *Spider* was killed when his plane crashed near the trains they robbed. But LaFitte seems awfully mad about something. He's trying to find out why the passenger train wasn't burned."

Wentworth smiled faintly. LaFitte had caught hell from his boss about that, without a doubt. It meant that the police finally and definitely knew that the train fires were the result of piratical looting. The wrecks of the planes he had shot down would reveal the means that had been employed. All of which made his own work easier.

Once more, Wentworth's keen brain was racing, his body fully restored by the rest. He had fixed his plan. It would be useless to attempt an escape from this place to warn of the attack upon the *Mesopotamia.* Besides, once away, it would not be possible to return, and the *Spider* could work best from within! His best chance was to invade LaFitte's own quarters and send the message over LaFitte's own radio! The revelations made by his attack on the trains would assist him in convincing authorities. . . .

There were nearly a hundred of the pirates gathered in the long bar room when Wentworth finally left his quarters. "Better stay right here," he growled at the girl. "I don't want no other guy making passes at you, see?"

The girl clasped her hands, whispered that she "saw," and Wentworth swung down the corridor. He kept out of LaFitte's way during the hours before darkness, but he was aware more than once that the leader's murderous small eyes had sought him out. LaFitte would not forget!

And regularly, every hour, LaFitte vanished from the bar room for a brief while . . . to make his report to the real leader of this pirate gang of killers!

It was when LaFitte left to make his ten o'clock report that Wentworth also slipped into the darkness outside the candle-lit interior. Heavy drapes hung across all windows and doors to prevent any escaping glance of illumination from betraying to possible passing planes the fact that the abandoned fort now was occupied. The darkness helped. No one saw Wentworth as he stole along in the shadow of the buildings toward the larger structure that housed LaFitte's own quarters.

A window gave him the observation post he needed. The shade was drawn tightly, and there was a drape inside. But Wentworth needed only a glimpse. He reached through to twitch the drapes apart and provide a narrow slit for vision. LaFitte was pushing aside a bookcase section. Behind it was a radio transmitter and a small barrel safe. Wentworth eyed the safe respectfully . . . LaFitte had chosen well! . . . then he allowed the curtain to sag back into place again. He scuttled away from the window.

The guard over the plane hangars was somnolent and disgruntled over the revelries he could not attend. He did not see a shadow slip into the hangar when he was at the other end of his post, nor hear the soft footfalls as the *Spider* stole toward the ships. Wentworth swiftly identified the plane in which he had arrived and, from beneath the cushion of his chair, he rapidly drew out another canvas sack like the one in which the money had been carried!

ONCE more he slipped past the guard. When he reached LaFitte's quarters, the place was dark and the bookcase had been slid back into its proper position. Wentworth pushed it aside and knelt before the safe, glanced at the clock attached to the radio. Three-quarters of an hour before LaFitte would return. . . . Wentworth set to work on the safe's twin dials.

Half an hour later, Wentworth straightened stiffly from before the safe. He twisted the handle and swung open the door. Swiftly, he thrust the packets of bills from the canvas sack into the compartments of the safe and once more locked the door! He hesitated then, staring at the radio, calculating swiftly. He shook his head. There was no time now. After the next call. . . .

Wentworth slid the bookcase back into place, reached the window in two long strides and then, hand on the curtain, he checked! LaFitte's voice sounded gruffly just below the window! He was returning ahead of time!

Wentworth waited until LaFitte's heavy footsteps had faded toward the entrance of the building, then swarmed over the window sill and hurried back toward the main taproom. He slumped down at a table, whistled on his fingers for a drink. When it had come, he took the whisky glass in his fist and wandered until he found a game of stud poker where he could kibitz.

He was there when he saw Marian Dawes pop in through the outer door. She stood rigidly just inside the entrance while her wide eyes searched the bar room. Wentworth turned slowly so that she could see him, and a quick alertness crept into his eyes. There was fright in her poise, but in some way he knew that it was not because of some molestation. Her shoulders did not cringe as they would in some physical fear.

Wentworth's keen mind read the riddle even as she spotted him and began to weave a rapid way among the tables to his side. Some threat to himself was implied . . . Wentworth's arms closed down lightly against his sides, feeling the reassuring bulge of his automatics. He rolled his shoulders a little to free them. His coat already hung open. . . .

Marian was putting on a good act now. She smiled widely as she came up to him, sidled close to take his arm.

"I haven't seen you for hours, Soapy," she said.

One of the men at the stud table swore incredulously. "For God's sake!" he exploded. "Imagine a girl nuts over Soapy!"

The table rocked with laughter and Wentworth scowled at the men ferociously. He spoke to the girl, under cover of the shouts, and his lips did not move with his words.

"Tell me quickly," he whispered. "What is it?"

Marian stood on tiptoes and her voice was a gasp of fear. "I followed you," she whispered. "LaFitte . . . I heard him talking to somebody over the radio! . . . He yelled, 'The *Spider* here! How do you know he's here?' . . . And afterwards, he told Spurr something. . . ."

Wentworth said, "Come on, let's get away from these mugs! Hell, if they can't appreciate a guy that can make a hundred and fifty grand in one night for them, to hell with them!"

The stud dealer chuckled. "A hundred and fifty grand, hunh?"

"That's what I got out of that safe on the train," Wentworth said shortly. "You can ask LaFitte. Come on, Marian."

Wentworth's mind was racing. The leader was shrewder than he would have believed possible. How the devil could the unknown boss of the pirates know that? He shook his head. It must be a shrewd guess at best, based on some findings at the wreck of the train. . . . He stooped toward Marian.

"What did LaFitte say?" he asked.

"LaFitte said," Marian hesitated. "He said, 'I don't believe the *Spider's* here, but we'll have to turn up some guy for the boss.' He said, 'Here's my chance to get rid of that lousy safe-cracker, Soapy. We'll tie him up and give a shot."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Death of The Spider!

WENTWORTH nodded gravely as he listened to Marian Dawes and his eyes moved quietly over the room. Almost every man in the camp was here, drinking; all save a few of the guards, and Spurr, and LaFitte.

"I imagine that Spurr fell in readily with his plans," Wentworth said softly. "He rather fancies that death-by-thirst stunt."

Marian clung to his arm. "Oh, he did! What will you do, Soapy?"

Wentworth smiled faintly, and there was nothing of the cringing Soapy about the taut curve of his lips. "This helps my plans along," he said softly. "Here, my dear, is a flashlight. When Spurr is elected leader of the pirates, and you hear a pronouncement following the laughter of the *Spider* . . . focus this light upon Spurr's face and turn it on! But do this from the darkness, and lay the flashlight down so that you can leave that spot swiftly! You will be taking your life in your hands, but I do not think they will suspect . . . a woman!"

Marian Dawes looked up at Wentworth and her face was pale. "You talk . . . differently now!" she whispered. "You don't sound like Soapy."

Wentworth smiled down on her gently. "You will carry out the orders?"

"Oh, *yes!*"

Wentworth nodded and turned away from her, and when he crossed the room toward the stud poker table again, his shoulder was hunched as Soapy carried it, and there was his limp, and the sly furtiveness of his smile. Through a moment, Marian Dawes watched him, then she looked down at the flashlight in her hands. She caught her breath, and hid the flashlight and ran out again into the night darkness.

Wentworth was standing once more by the poker table and gazing down at the man who was dealing.

"Listen, Studsy," he whined, "a little while ago, you laughed when I said I fed a hundred and fifty grand into the kitty for the bunch."

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There was that about Wentworth's voice that stopped the dealer's hands, and made him lift up his bald head, with its fringe of pinkish hair quickly. His head looked comical until you saw his small hard eyes, and the pinched peril of his mouth. He pushed back his chair slowly and came to his feet.

"Yeah," he said flatly, "I laughed!"

Wentworth had a placating smile on his lips, but his eyes were narrowed. His voice had a whine, but there was menace beneath it. "I thought so," he said. "I want to know why . . . you laughed! Maybe you don't believe I put a hundred and fifty grand in the kitty?"

Studsy's heavy lips moved in a slow grin. "Well, maybe that's right," he said. "Maybe I don't believe it, and there's a good reason why."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah!" Studsy had only one hand on the table. The other hovered at the gap of his vest. "Yeah. I don't believe you put a hundred and fifty grand in the kitty, on account of I'm straw boss around here . . . and LaFitte gave me the accounting. And LaFitte said you kicked through just one hundred grand. That's all!"

Wentworth said, incredulously. "LaFitte said that?" He took his hand out of his coat pocket and bounced on it casually a half dozen small brownish capsules. "You swear, Studsy, that LaFitte said I only kicked in a hundred grand?"

There was a general silence in the room. Men were staring toward where Wentworth stood, confronting Studsy.

"That's what I said!" Studsy snapped angrily.

"And not a hundred and fifty grand like I said?"

Studsy glared at Wentworth, straightened slowly. "What in the hell are you talking about?" His voice lifted angrily. "I say LaFitte says you didn't kick in a hundred and fifty grand. Only a hundred!"

WENTWORTH nodded, turned so that he stood beside Studsy. His back was to the wall, and he was facing all that room full of men. There were killers' faces confronting him. Every one of these men had killed and killed again. And they were listening to talk about the one thing that was important to them—money.

Wentworth's voice lifted clearly, "LaFitte says he got a hundred grand. I gave him a hundred and fifty. LaFitte put the other fifty grand in his pocket, and gyped the gang. LaFitte is a liar!"

As Wentworth finished the sentence, LaFitte flung open the outer door of the room and stepped inside. He filled that door and Spurr, beside him, had a swaggering smile on his thin mouth.

"What's that?" LaFitte roared. "Somebody said something about me!"

Wentworth said, "Yes, LaFitte. I just told the gang that you took fifty grand out of the swag I gave you last night and put it in your pocket. You thought I didn't count it, but I did."

There was a hissing sound like the tearing of thick silk in that room. It was the indrawn startled breath of the waiting men. The stared incredulously at this man they knew was Soapy Nixon. He still wore that cringing furtiveness upon his face, but there was nothing weak in the way he had challenged LaFitte!

LaFitte stared like a man struck violently and unexpectedly in the stomach. Then red blood surged up his face. He clawed at the gun at his hip; shook his head. He roared out an angry oath and came striding across the bar room. His hip struck a table and sent it crashing to the floor. He was Gargantua on the loose.

But Wentworth stood casually, still jiggling the half dozen brownish capsules on his palm. He stepped backward and whipped the drape from over a window. He flicked one of the capsules out into space.

Instantly, there was a terrific, stunning explosion. Plaster loosened on the wall and rattled to the floor. Dust sifted down through the roof.

"I'm a soup man," Wentworth said, whining in Soapy's voice. "My real name ain't Soapy at all. It's Soupy. I got lots more soup in my hand, LaFitte."

LaFitte had checked a dozen feet away. His hand hovered about the butt of his automatic, but Wentworth had a capsule poised on his thumbnail like a marble. It was aimed toward LaFitte. Wentworth's voice whined on. . . .

"You hadn't ought to lie about me like that, LaFitte," he said. "You know there was a hundred and fifty grand in that bag I handed you on the plane."

LaFitte found his voice. "You cockeyed stir-crazy ape," he snapped. "Put down those capsules before I blow hell out of you."

Wentworth whined, "Now, LaFitte, I don't like to do things like this. But if you don't tell the boys the truth, I'm going to get tough. I took a hundred and fifty grand out of that safe on the train. Spurr here searched me in your place right after we got off the plane. I didn't have no fifty grand on me, did I, Spurr? Did I, huh?"

Spurr had his hand on his gun butt and there was a trace of indecision in his manner. His legs were braced apart in his perpetual pose, his head thrown up in the swaggering, challenging way he had.

"Seems to me," Wentworth whined on, "that if LaFitte don't produce that other fifty grand, we ought to depose him. That's the way regular pirates do. Depose him and elect another chief what won't steal from us . . . Spurr, you searched me."

Spurr's eyes were narrow and they rested coldly on Wentworth. "I searched you, yeah," he said. "You didn't have money on you. But I went into LaFitte's room and counted the bag with him. He had just one hundred grand in it."

Wentworth nodded. "Yeah, Spurr, but you remember when we was talking, the clock struck. LaFitte said he had to tend to something. And he went into the room alone. Remember? He had the money bag the whole way on the plane. And it's fifty grand short. Guess maybe we ought to search LaFitte's room."

LAFITTE whipped out his revolver, and Wentworth tensed his thumb. If he snapped it, both LaFitte and Spurr would be killed. Maybe some others. He owed them no mercy. They were all killers . . . but that was not the way he had planned it. Things must be violently disturbed. The news of trouble must go through to the leader, so that he would come here . . . and the *Spider* could strike!

LaFitte rasped, "This has gone far enough. Hell, you let this guy lie you into anything!"

Studsy said, "Maybe, but—"

"Shut up!" LaFitte snarled. "I'm boss here and I'm running things. You damned fools, this man isn't Soapy! He's *the Spider!*"

Wentworth let his jaw gape. Men stared at him, and they saw a man stupefied with amazement. LaFitte was shouldering forward, his gun ready.

And Wentworth giggled!

The laughter came out thinly, ridiculously from his lips. He giggled, and made his voice high and thin.

"Catch me, boys," he giggled, "I'm the *Spider!*"

Studsy burst into a guffaw of laughter. Behind LaFitte, Spurr threw back his head in raucous amusement. LaFitte checked and stared about him in bewilderment. He did not believe his charge himself, but until that moment he had not realized how ridiculous it would sound to these men. The usually cringing, whining Soapy . . . the Master of Men? It was too fabulous!

Wentworth's shrewd mind had already sensed that incongruity, and his giggle, his jeering words had topped off the joke. The men were rocking with laughter. All but Studsy. After that single guffaw, he was silent.

He lifted his hand and silence came quickly. "I'm straw boss for the boys," he said. "I'm their spokesman. I was there when the money was tallied, and there was only a hundred grand. What about it, LaFitte?"

LaFitte said furiously, "Damn you, Studsy! A hundred grand was all there was!"

Wentworth took a paper out of his pocket and tossed it down on the table in front of Studsy. The man pulled his small, ugly eyes down to the folded sheet, suddenly snatched it up. LaFitte took a stride forward and Spurr was abruptly right behind him. He had his gun out.

"Wait a minute, LaFitte," he said softly. "Just a little minute!"

Studsy's head came up from reading the paper, and there were hot red spots in his cheeks, and a glitter in his eyes. "This here is the express company invoice off the train," he said thickly. "It calls for a hundred and fifty grand!"

Suddenly, men were on their feet everywhere, and their voices lifted in harsh anger. Wentworth's voice penetrated, because it sounded still in Soapy's shrill tones.

"Wait a minute now, boys," he said. "We gotta find the money. It's bound to be in LaFitte's room!"

LaFitte made a fierce and sudden lunge toward Wentworth. His thick hands reached for Wentworth's throat. But Studsy heaved over the table in his path, and stepped in front of Wentworth.

"Wait a minute, LaFitte," he said, softly. "We'll take that hip gun of yours, and the other one you carry under your arm. Thanks, Spurr. Now, we'll go look for this fifty grand."

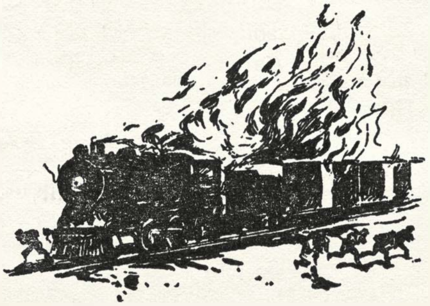
THEY found the safe behind the movable book-case, and they found the fifty grand that Wentworth had planted there. Wentworth saw to that . . . and fury burst loose among the pirates. It was not alone the fifty grand and the fact that they had been duped. It was the records, hidden in the safe, of a dozen other thefts from the pirates. It was the women he had forced his men to surrender to him, and the friends of theirs he had sent to the stake . . . to die horribly of the thirst drug.

Wentworth faded into the background then. He had done his job and LaFitte would be deposed, was already removed from his post as chief of the pirates. Soon, they would elect another leader, and there was no doubt that the man chosen would be Spurr. When that happened, Spurr must die!

Wentworth's lips closed thinly. He had no compunction about destroying Spurr! Too many men had died under his ruthless hands in the robberies of the trains. Three days before Wentworth had arrived here, Spurr had got tired of the girl he had virtually enslaved. He had pinned her to the post . . . and left her to die of the torture of the thirst drug!

No, he did not think he would mind killing Spurr!

It was not long after a fusillade had ended LaFitte's murderous life that the crowd trooped back into the bar room



again and Studsy climbed up on a table.

"We got to elect a new boss," he said. "One that won't steal from us."

"Better not!" Men yelled. "Next one will die at the post!" "We ain't going to be robbed."

Studsy waved them down. "I'm choosing Spurr," he said.

"Yeah, Spurr!" Wentworth yelled from his far corner.

Instantly, the men were yelling in approval. Wentworth set his gaze carefully over the room. At a window, he caught a faint movement of a drapery, and the glint of metal. He smiled slightly. Marian Dawes was ready to do her part!

Spurr moved, swaggering across the room. There was blood spattered on his white clothing, LaFitte's blood. The sash around his waist was like blood, too, and the knit cap jaunty on his head. He mounted the table and Studsy stepped down.

"How about it men?" Spurr called, and lifted a hand. "Want me to bring in the money for you, and the women?"

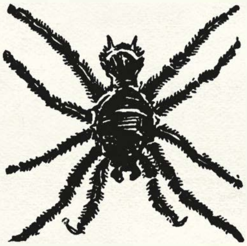
The shout of welcome was deafening and Spurr listened for a while with a calmly, superior smile on his lips. Then he waved them to silence. He waited, as a good showman should, while the last whisper of sound died. Then, as he opened his lips, to speak, a cold and menacing sound floated through the crowded room. It came from no man knew where, and it chilled the blood of every man who heard.

The laughter of the Spider!

Spurr's lips snapped shut and he glared at the assembled men; his hand rested on the butt of his gun. Then, while the silence still held, the mocking voice that had laughed projected a single sentence into that room of fright.

"Death!" it pronounced. *"Death to all who lead the pirates!"*

And at that moment, a beam of light, of shadow, reached across the barroom. From the window that Wentworth had spotted, it stemmed, and it struck across the blood and white figure of Spurr. Spurr could not see the thing that happened himself, but a moan of shaken and superstitious laughter lifted from the roomful of men. It was no ordinary beam of light that fell upon Spurr.



It was the shadow of a giant Spider!

Spurr's gun was in his hand and he hurled a bullet toward the window from which the light came. His hoarse voice lifted like a trumpet.

"Kill him!" he shouted. *"Kill the Spider!"*

Wentworth leaped to his feet and shook his fist in the air. "Kill the *Spider!*" he shouted.

In an instant, the men went into action. They poured out through the doors, some climbed out the windows. They ran everywhere with flashlights in their hands, guns cocked and ready, hunting the *Spider*. Wentworth ran with them, but he kept an eye on the bold, striding figure of Spurr.

HE SAW the new chief of the pirates when, presently, he glanced at his watch, swore and headed for LaFitte's quarters and the radio. Then Wentworth slipped to his room and dragged from the hiding place he had made beneath the floor, a long black cape that he had fashioned! He had no more than that, but with a black mask over his face, it would suffice . . . That, and the slim cigarette lighter that printed the seal of the *Spider!*

As he whirled toward the door, there was sudden movement there. Marian Dawes stepped into his path.

"They're getting ready to search all the rooms," she whispered. "If there's anything here. . . ."

Wentworth caught her shoulders in his hands. "Not now," he said. "What did you do with the flashlight?"

She took the flash from her pocket and threw its round beam on light on the ceiling. The seal of the *Spider* had been removed!

Wentworth laughed softly. "Good! Now, listen carefully! Here's information which you may have to carry to civilization. The pirates are planning to stop and loot the ship *Mesopotamia* tomorrow night. They won't, if I can prevent it. But, if things go wrong, don't forget that!"

He moved toward the door, but Marian's touch on his arm stopped him. "*Spider* . . . Soapy . . ." she hesitated. "You're a good man, *Spider.*"

Wentworth laughed again, lightly, and darted out the door. When Marian peered out a moment later, he was gone!

Spurr was still at the radio. There was perspiration on his forehead, and he was explaining: "We're hunting him now. He won't escape . . . yes, everything will be ready for tomorrow night and I know all the plans. Right . . . The *Spider?* Hell, he's just a man. I'll polish him off in short order!"

Just behind him, a voice spoke softly. "*Are you quite sure of that, Spurr?*"

Spurr gasped an oath. He sprang from the radio, whirled with a gun in his fist. The figure in the black mask, with the long black cape, held no gun. And Spurr laughed.

"You're overstepped this time, *Spider!*" he said, harshly. "I promised I'd polish you off, and I will."

Wentworth stood with the twisted shoulders and hunched back of the *Spider,* his arms folded across his chest. He spoke softly, "I'll give you one chance for your life, Spurr. Tell me the real leader of this gang of unspeakable pirates!"

Spurr laughed, and the sound was harsh and rasping in his throat. He made no other answer, but suddenly whipped his revolver into line and squeezed the trigger! His gun kicked against his stiffened wrist . . . but the *Spider* was no longer before him! With an incredibly swift movement, he had leaped aside just as the gun blasted!

"One more chance, Spurr," Wentworth repeated softly. "Talk—or die!"

Sweat was suddenly beaded on Spurr's forehead. His gun hand shook slightly as he lifted very carefully, very warily. "No man can move that fast," he whispered. "I swear I hit you, and—" He fired again!

Wentworth seemingly had only swayed aside.

"I never allow any man more than two shots at me, Spurr!" he said softly. "Now, will you talk, or—"

With a curse, Spurr hurled himself forward. He held the gun far ahead of him, and he jammed it hard against Wentworth's ribs. He never fired the shot. Wentworths' arms came unfolded, and the automatic in the left spat out its lethal lead. It caught Spurr just under the chin.

Spurr's body leaped upward convulsively, upward and back. It struck in the middle of the room, and his feet kicked only twice. There was enough of his face left for the *Spider* to print his seal.

SOFTLY, he moved toward the radio, while his keen ears took swift account of the shouts and running in the quadrangle. Wentworth bent to the microphone and his voice went out, metallic and ominous, over the air.

"Your second pirate captain is dead," he whispered. The third and the fourth will die the same way, under the seal of the *Spider. As you, too, will die!"*

For a little moment, there was silence, then a thick voice answered him. Its syllables were so choked and guttural that almost it seemed as if some wild beast, was forming words! But the voice was cool.

"Don't boast, *Spider,"* it said slowly. "A man is a fool to boast when he doesn't know enough. Not even what hostages he has given to the enemy!"

There was a click and the radio went dead, but Wentworth still stood there, staring blankly at space while the hoarse shouts of the questing pirates, and their running feet rushed nearer. Impossible that the owner of that bestial voice could know the *Spider's* identity as Richard Wentworth! Impossible, and yet what else could the leader of the pirates have meant!

Wentworth shook his head sharply. There could be no doubt as to the man's meaning.

He held Nita van Sloan a prisoner!

Even as Wentworth straightened, he heard fists beat upon the panel of the door he had locked.

"Spurr!" a man shouted. "Spurr, are you all right?"

Wentworth switched off the light . . . and an instant later, the drape was snatched from the window.

"Spurr, are you all right?"

"Sure," Wentworth said softly. "Sure, Spurr is all right. He's only dead!" He sent his mocking laughter into the darkness!

The *Spider* was flat against the wall by the door and he reached out his hand toward the lock. He ripped the mask off his face, and the cloak from his shoulders . . . and then he unfastened the door!

The heavy shock of charging men struck the door in the same instant and it exploded inward. Men tumbled to the floor! There were fierce shouts. A gun crashed. Over their fallen heads, Wentworth tossed *Spider* cape and mask out of the room through the open door, then he was on the floor with the rest!

"For Cripe's sake!" he whined in Soapy's rasping voice. "Get the hell off my neck!"

Someone turned the light on then and Wentworth pushed to his feet with the rest. Studsy was farthest in the room. He stood with a gun in his fist almost directly over Spurr's supine body. Wentworth heard his strangled oath, then Studsy whipped around. There were three men crowded into the window, guns in their fists. The door behind Wentworth was choked with men.

Slowly, Studsy's eyes went over every detail of the room, and there was a creeping pallor in his face that made his small mean eyes uglier than ever.

"A man can't vanish into thin air," he whispered. "The *Spider* was in this room. I heard him. We all heard him . . . laughing."

"Jeez, oh Jeez," Wentworth whispered. "Laughing . . . Look, Studsy, you gotta be the new leader now. Ain't nobody else can take the job."

Studsy whipped toward him. "Shut up, you damned fool!" he howled. "The *Spider* is somewhere around here!"

His fear filtered into very man in that room of death. They shifted their feet uneasily, and there was a backward shrinking toward the door. Wentworth moved with them, stiffly. He twisted his head about and stared at dark corners.

"You ain't got no choice, Studsy," he whispered. "You're the boss now!"

Studsy shouted, "Damn you to hell!"

Wentworth's elbow hit the light button. There was an instant of dark waiting, and then the harsh and mocking laughter they knew so well sounded. Men screamed like animals. They jammed in the doorway to escape. Studsy's gun began to crash. Bullets ploughed into the darkness and thudded into human flesh. Studsy was screaming, too.

WENTWORTH'S gun spoke only once. He stole through the bedlam of terror to stoop where Studsy had fallen and press the *Seal* upon his forehead, then he joined the stampede of the others. The mob was leaderless now, and terrified. The shadow of the *Spider* lay across Fort Hell and no man knew where death would strike next. A group of the men barricaded themselves in the bar room and manned the windows with guns. Another group fled into the drifting desert of sand beyond the walls, and others stormed the plane hangar in a fit of blind fear.

Wentworth went with those last men, and vanished into the shadows of the hangar. From the shadows, he watched the fugitives start to wheel a great stratoplane toward the open. When they had it exactly in the doorway, he flipped a nitroglycerine capsule to the concrete ramp beneath it. In the red flare of the explosion, the plane reared like a living thing, like some dinosaur out of darkness. It clawed the air . . . and fell in shattered wreckage to the earth. Men fled . . . and Wentworth drifted through the darkness and into the hangar.

His movements were swift and sure as he set about disabling the engines of the planes. It wasn't much work for an expert, a rip at a motor here, a smash there with the wrench. . . . Outside was bedlam. Shots and screams rang through the night. Every shadow held a fearsome death for these men. Those who had barricaded themselves in the buildings fought off others who sought to enter.

There was grim satisfaction upon Wentworth's lips, but there was haste, too, in his movements. He had wrecked the pirate morale and he must destroy their means of escape before sanity returned to them. Else, they could be rallied by the real leader of the murderous gang . . . the man Wentworth knew only as a voice on the radio.

The man who had hinted that he held Nita van Sloan hostage—now, this very minute!

Furiously, as he worked, Wentworth's mind was racing over the events of his battle against the pirates. But there was no evidence to convict, or to exonerate, any one of the men who had fallen under suspicion. Even Hartford was not in the clear. There had been absolutely nothing to prove conclusively that it had been Hartford himself who walked the plank from the Times Building. His fingers had been . . . destroyed.

Wentworth laughed softly as he worked. No, he could not name the real leader of this band of criminals, but unless the man wanted to lose his entire crew and the heavy investment represented by these stratoplanes, he was even now on his way to Fort Hell! He would be able to raise no one over the radio. He had heard the shots that had killed Spurr, and possibly Studsy, since the transmission unit had not been disconnected.

When he arrived, the *Spider* would be waiting!

AFTERWARD, he could plan a reception for the ten stratoplanes that would be returning from Europe. Yes, it seemed fairly simple now . . . but Nita was in his hands!

Wentworth hurried toward the last of the planes, mounted to the high engine nacelle. Outside, the sound of shots was fading out. Only a few sporadic guns cracked in the darkness. Then, they too, were silent. He must hurry back to keep the fear alive. If they appointed more leaders, the men must die under the *Spider's* seal. Wentworth dropped down from the engine nacelle, turned toward the hangar doors. . . .

Suddenly, the hangar was flooded with light!

Wentworth's hand flew to his guns . . . and stopped. His eyes shifted slowly across the broad main doors, the narrow side entrances. All were plugged with men. A half dozen machine guns, a score of automatics bore on him.

In the center of the main door stood a man in a black mask. But it was not at him that the *Spider* looked.

Before him, the man held . . . *Nita van Sloan!*

On each side of her stood a man with a sub-machine gun. Their muzzles pressed into her sides! Nita's firm head was lifted in courage, and there was a smile on her lips.

The man in the mask spoke, softly, "Drop your gun, *Spider*. You're finished."

Through a long moment. Wentworth hesitated while his lightning swift brain sought a way out. Obviously, even with the speed of stratoplanes, the Leader had been on his way west when he had talked with Spurr. That did not matter now. These guns. . . . No, he could accomplish nothing against them. Not even nitroglycerine could remove half of them. Sacrifice of Nita's life could accomplish nothing. The Leader would re-establish his pirate gang, repair the planes . . . God, the *Spider* could not even save the *Mesopotamia!*

Wentworth's guns sagged in his hands. He straightened out of his fighting crouch and let the guns fall to the floor. Their brief metallic clatter was the only sound in all the hangar save the slow outblown breath of a score of battle-tensed men.

Wentworth folded his arms and calmly relaxed.

"It looks very much," he said, "as if you had won this deal."

"Not this deal," the Leader mocked him. "The whole game, *Spider*. Oh, yes, definitely—*the whole game!*"

CHAPTER NINE

The Thirsty Death

WENTWORTH had known, on his surrender, that he would be doomed to death. He had hoped that some means of escape, of triumph would come to his keen brain that had saved him in so many hopeless battles.

The chance did not come.

Even Wentworth's most dire fears had not anticipated the death that would be meted out to him and Nita!

Within five minutes of their capture, he and Nita were bound to posts in what had once been the horse shed of the old fort. Side by side, ten feet apart, they stood completely helpless in their bonds.

The Leader stood well away from them and, even in their ropes, the machine guns kept watch.

Then a sneering pirate walked up to Nita and to Wentworth . . . and injected the colorless contents of a hypodermic needle into their throats!

The Leader laughed, thinly. "Within fifteen minutes, *Spider,*" he said, "you and Miss van Sloan will feel a definite dryness in your throats. You will, in other words, be thirsty. That thirst will . . . increase. In two hours, more or less, according to the moisture content of your bodies, you will die . . . *of thirst!*"

Wentworth put a mocking smile on his lips. He heard Nita laugh, and the sound was pure and silvery! Ah, but Nita had her trust in Wentworth to uphold her . . . and Wentworth had only himself!

And there was no hope.

For a few seconds longer, the Leader stared at them, then he turned on his heel and stalked toward the bar room building. Two machine-gunners stood watch at a distance of fifty feet. Their eyes did not waver from their steady regard of the *Spider* and his mate.

Even helplessly bound, doomed by the

drugs in his veins, they did not trust the *Spider*. Their fear of him was too great.

In fifteen minutes, Wentworth felt the dryness in his throat. It increased. At first, he had tried to give Nita some shreds of hope. But that was cruelty. She told him, lightly, how she had been taken. Ram Singh was in the hospital, in grave condition from his wounds. On the trail of the coffins, she and Jackson had walked into ambush. And Jackson had been shot.

"I don't even know if he is still alive," Nita said slowly. "There won't be any help there."

Even so early, there was a hoarseness in the deep music of Nita's throat.

No hope.

Wentworth thought of Marian Dawes and wondered where she was. There might have been some help there, were it not for these machine gun guards. Not even Nita could have circumvented them. She could have, being free, shot them down before they could open fire. But the sound would have brought an instant alarm.

No, there was no hope.

It was a half hour after the injection that the Leader came back out of the building. Beside him stalked a swaggering pirate, the new chief of the camp. The Leader kept his distance, standing remotely between the machine gunners.

"I leave you now, *Spider,*" he said, mockingly. "You caused considerable damage but you're through. The stratoplanes will be repaired in time for the raid at sea tomorrow night. It will be necessary, I understand from the passenger list, to kill some five hundred persons. Those matters disturb your heart, I believe, *Spider*. You may think of those approaching deaths while you . . . thirst."

THE Leader nodded formally, turned away and presently twin motors of a plane began to roar outside the walls.

It was while they were at their peak that a piercing whisper sounded in Wentworth's ears!

Wentworth's muscles tightened, but he did not move, or indicate he heard the whisper. He let his head sag forward and he moved one of his bound hands behind him to indicate he had heard. For he had recognized the voice of Marian Dawes!

"I'm outside the shed," she whispered. "There is a slit here and I have a knife but I'm ten feet away!"

Wentworth motioned with his hand to show he understood, and the whisper came again.

"I can make the knife strike on the point," Marian whispered. "But I can't be sure it will . . . hit the post! It might hit you!"

Wentworth's lips twisted in a faint smile. He gestured again with his hand. He whispered, *"Throw!"*

One of the machine gunners jerked up his weapon. "What was that?" he snapped.

Wentworth tossed his head. "For God's sake," he whispered hoarsely. "Throw some water over me. If you can't give me a drink, ***throw*** . . . some water."

The machine gunner laughed hoarsely. "Now, now," he said, "it's only been a half hour or so. You'll want it even more a bit later. Maybe we'll throw you some then. *Maybe . . .*"

Nita's head twisted toward Wentworth. There was a slight frown between her brows. Her lips were pressed firmly together. Wentworth braced himself to show nothing if the knife hit him. If only Marian would throw! God, she must! But he dare not say any more.

The blow came on his left forearm. Pain slashed to his shoulder, seemed to pour hotly into his brain. Wentworth's body did not move. Not even a muscle quivered in his face. He lifted his right hand slightly in thanks to the hidden Marian, motioning her away. He kept his head down lest the machine gunners see the hope that blazed in his eyes

Behind him, he strained his right hand against the bonds to reach the knife. The tips of his fingers could just touch the blade. It wasn't imbedded very deeply. Slowly, Wentworth thrust his left wrist down against the bonds, to push his hands a little closer together. That way, he could get the blade between two fingers. He clamped them close together and pulled.

The blade twisted in the wound, sliced sideways in the flesh. Wentworth's downturned face gave no sign, unless it was the whiteness about his lips. He had the knife now between his fingers, free of the wound. He forced his left hand to contract upon the handle, though the pain ran hotly upward again. But he had the knife!

The roar of the plane was dwindling into the upper air. Men trooped back through the gates into the quadrangle. Many stopped to jeer at the *Spider*. It was twenty minutes before they left . . . and almost an hour of his alloted two was fled! The thirst was a torment. His mouth and throat were a scratchy agony. It was torture to swallow. His whole body shrieked for water. Even the slow trickle of blood down his wrist was a torment. It was liquid. . . .

Wentworth sawed at the ropes that bound his wrists. The knife was not very sharp. When the ropes came free, he stood motionless through long minutes while the circulation was restored in his hands. He worked the fingers carefully. His head still sagged, but under his brows he was watching the gunners. His long lack of movement had relaxed them somewhat. They were talking together idly, unconcerned.

Two machine gunners . . . twenty feet away.

Wentworth fumbled with his clothing. They had stripped him of weapons, taken the handful of nitro-glycerine capsules in careful fear. But they had been very sure of him, sure he was to die. They might have missed one of those tiny lumps of gelatine. They might . . . Wentworth slit through the cloth of his coat, slit the inside of his pocket. He prodded into it with careful slow movements of his fingers. The machine gunners must suspect nothing.

Nothing in the pocket that would help. No gelatine capsule. Only a coin of some sort. Wentworth fingered it. A penny!

Laughter surged against his dry throat. A knife, and a penny!

WENTWORTH'S eyes were burning now. He stared fixedly at the ground. His ankles were bound to the post. If he threw the knife, he could kill one of

"I Talked with God"

(Yes, I Did—Actually and Literally)

and, as a result of that little talk with God some ten years ago, a strange new Power came into my life. After 43 years of horrible, sickening, dismal failure, this strange Power brought to me a sense of overwhelming victory, and I have been overcoming every undesirable condition of my life ever since. What a change it was. Now—I have credit at more than one bank, I own a beautiful home, drive a lovely car, own a newspaper and a large office building, and my wife and family are amply provided for after I leave for shores unknown. In addition to these material benefits, I have a sweet peace in my life. I am happy as happy can be. No circumstance ever upsets me, for I have learned how to draw upon the invisible God-Law, under any and all circumstances.

You, too, may find and use the same staggering Power of the God-Law that I use. It can bring to you, too, whatever things are right and proper for you to have. Do you believe this? It won't cost much to find out—just a penny post-card or a letter, addressed to Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 391, Moscow, Idaho, will bring you the story of the most fascinating success of the century. And the same Power I use is here for your use, too. I'll be glad to tell you about it. All information about this experience will be sent you free, of course. The address again —Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 391, Moscow, Idaho. Advt. Copyright 1939 Frank B. Robinson.

the machine gunners, but then it would be impossible to free his feet. Would he have time to cut his feet free, then throw the knife, then reach the other gunner? . . .

Wentworth pulled up his head.

"I am dying," he said hoarsely, "but I've taken a number of you pirates along with me. I killed Spurr and Studsy. I could have blown you all up with my little nitro-glycerine bombs. Nice little things, those nitro-glycerine bombs. They don't cause any shell wounds, because they're made of gelatine. They just blow you to hell."

The machine gunners glared at him suspiciously. "What the hell are you talking about?" one snarled. "You ain't got any more nitro-glycerine bombs!"

Wentworth said, "Of course not. I was just thinking how nice it would be if I had one."

The machine gunners glanced at each other uneasily. "Is he nuts, Flash?"

Wentworth threw back his head and laughed hoarsely. "A little flash between Mike and Flash—and then *hash!*"

He moved his hand, thrust into his pocket through the slit, and his coat bulged a little.

"Hey!" Mike gasped. "He's got his hand in his pocket!"

Flash lifted his machine-gun. "Take your hand out of your pocket!" he snapped.

Wentworth said, "Certainly. If you insist." He drew his hand back, and his coat no longer bulged. He held the penny balanced on his thumb-nail. "Even if you shot me," he said softly, "it might explode a nitro-glycerine bomb, if I had a nitro-glycerine bomb. I'm quite sure it would be effective at this distance. Twenty feet? Sure."

Mike swore harshly. "Keep your gun on him, Flash. I'm going to see if they overlooked one of those damned bombs in his pocket. They ain't no bigger than a minute!"

Wentworth said, excitedly, "I haven't got a bomb. I swear I haven't!"

Mike came crouching in behind his submachine gun. Flash moved sideways so that he could continue to cover Wentworth. Nita was out of range now, thank God! Mike suddenly sprang toward Wentworth and Wentworth flung his hands high, threw the penny toward Flash!

"You won't get that bomb, Mike!" Wentworth cried.

Mike checked, jerked up the machine gun . . . and Wentworth whipped the knife forward. It had only two yards to travel and it moved like a thin sliver of light. Flash's yell, as the penny sailed toward him, lifted high and fearfully against the night. He dropped the machine gun. He turned and ran . . . and Mike took the knife through his throat!

Swift seconds dragged into years then. Flash was fleeing desperately from the arching penny which he thought was a nitro-glycerine bomb. Mike staggered, swayed, took a stumbling step. The machine gun clattered from his hands as he reached upward toward his throat. He fell, and his head struck Wentworth's feet!

Wentworth's lips twitched as he stooped swiftly and caught the knife by the hilt. It was not a weapon he liked. . . . He slashed at his ankle bonds and they resisted stubbornly. On the hard baked clay of the quadrangle, the penny rang briefly. Flash was still running, still screaming. Doors of the bar room whipped open and men poured out.

"Look out for the bomb!" Flash yelled.

WENTWORTH'S feet came free, and he heaved the dead Mike to one side, caught up the machine gun. Men were milling around the entrance of the bar room. Wentworth caught up a lump of clay from the ground and hurled it toward them, heard men scream. He bounded toward Nita . . . and he staggered. The drug was torment in his veins.

He slashed at Nita's wrist bonds with the knife, pushed out hoarse words. "Get the other machine gun," he rasped. "Don't use it. Run toward the hangar. The plane in the front rank, nearest the right side is undamaged. Get it going. There's a girl here. She threw the knife . . . Marian Dawes. We'll have to find her."

Nita said, "Right, Dick. I'll cut my ankles free." Her voice was husky.

A gun cracked from a window of the bar room. Wentworth sprang wide from Nita, flung himself down on the ground. The sub-machine gun stammered. Clay flew from the side of the window. A man screamed. Wentworth fanned the other two windows, the door. There were shouts, a few flashes of guns. Nita was running across the quadrangle toward the hangar. She stuck to the shadows.

At the hangar doors, she checked and the sub-machine gun chattered at her hip. Behind the far building which had housed LaFitte's office, a man screamed in death agony. There was the beat of running feet. Nita darted into the hangar.

"Marian!" Wentworth lifted his voice. "If you're still out there, get to the hangar. There's a plane. . . ."

Marian's voice answered, faintly. "I'm on the way!"

Wentworth pivoted and saw the black blur of a body of men charging toward him behind LaFitte's office. He squeezed down on the trigger, braced his weakened body against the kick of the gun. Men went down. Others fled. Behind him, Nita called out.

"Dick!" she cried. "The engines won't start!"

Wentworth tried to swear and there were no words, only a hoarse croak. His chest heaved, and the scene swam before his eyes. He couldn't fail now. He couldn't. Wentworth laughed crazily. He emptied the machine gun at the front of the building, wheeled toward the plane.

"Get in seats!" he shouted. "Strap yourselves down."

Marian was climbing into the doorway. Wentworth was only moments behind.

"Seats," he forced out words. "Strap yourselves down. I'm going to use the rockets!"

He stumbled past Nita, and she was calmly doing as he ordered. Marian flung herself into a seat, drew the straps tight. Wentworth reached the cockpit, and his tired eyes flicked over the controls. He knew planes. He knew what every dial and gadget was for. So he found the red throttle of the rocket control and flung himself into the pilot's seat. The cushions were two feet deep and high to support a man's whole body, and his head.

WENTWORTH set his lips grimly. He pulled the stick back the merest fraction. He would probably black out when the plane took off. Couldn't allow too much climb, or the rocket-driven ship would loop before he came out of it—if he came out of it at all!

Wentworth reached forward and cracked the rocket throttle. There was a slow whirring as of a pump, then a sputter of spark as if an oil burner were getting under way. Then, suddenly, the hangar about him shimmered with the dance of blue-white light.

He was conscious of a tremendous forward surge, of a flickering vision of men hurling themselves desperately aside. It was like being shot from a cannon . . . like a ten G pull-out in a power-diving plane. His senses faded, blacked out entirely.

A feeling of oppressive heat reached Wentworth's consciousness first. He called on his incredible will and forced himself out of the depths of blackness into which he had plunged.

A cry leaped to Wentworth's lips! He was staring straight down at the earth.

The instruments showed that he was upside down! But even then, Wentworth did not move too swiftly. His arms were light leaden weights. He gripped the stick and tilted the aileron a fraction, toed the rudder. The ship flipped over like a kite in a gale, slipped sideways, came up gradually under his careful hands. Its nose lifted above the horizon. Only then did Wentworth have the chance to seek for the cause of the heat.

It seemed to come from all sides of him, from the very walls of the plane!

Wentworth swore under his breath, and pulled the wheel back in his lap! Unless he could reach thin air quickly, they were doomed. For that heat was caused by the friction of the earth's atmosphere which they were piercing at speeds never before equalled by aircraft.

The ship swooped upward like a bird in the wind. As the altimeter needle climbed, the heat slowly dissipated. Wentworth sought for and found an oxygen valve, cracked it. They were already in the sub-stratosphere and still climbing. The ship's speed needle . . . Wentworth blinked at it, and then thankfulness flooded him.

According to the Leader, he had an hour of life left. They would be in New York before that time expired!

Presently, he was aware that Nita stood beside him. She held a wet cloth in her hand. He nodded, and pressed it into his swollen lips, began to suck on it. It eased the fiercely burning agony of his dried-out membranes. He would be able to speak soon. But the drug still ran riot in his veins.

Wentworth reached for the radio microphone and pulled it toward him. It was moments before he could force out words, but presently his strained throat formed syllables.

"Calling New York," he whispered. "New York. Calling Commissioner Kirkpatrick of the New York police!"

Wentworth did not know how long he spoke before a voice answered, and other long minutes dragged past before he heard Stanley Kirkpatrick!

"The leader of the pirates," Wentworth said hoarsely, "is on his way to New York now, if he has not already landed. He will come by plane. It may be Carlyle or Melville or Hartford. It may be Dr. Henshaw, who was interfering with your questioning of Carlyle. Kirk, get all those men together in the hospital, in separate roms. Have a motorcycle escort and an ambulance waiting for me at LaGuardia Airport."

Kirkpatrick said, slowly, "I'll do my best, Dick. This is important?"

Wild laughter pumped at Wentworth's drought-swollen throat. "It's life and death," he said thickly.

BESIDE him, Nita had sunk into the co-pilot's seat. Her eyes were closed. The wet cloth lay across her lips.

Wentworth continued to force dogged words from his lips, telling of the pirate camp in the Dust Bowl, of the plan to take the *Mesopotamia.*

"Ten planes are on their way back from Europe now," he said. "If men can get to the camp in time, they can capture them. No plane can overtake these ships. They're too fast."

Wentworth sagged back against the cushions. Cautiously, he took water into his mouth from the caràfe which Nita had brought. His body shrieked for the moisture. He dared not take much. Kirkpatrick's voice was punching words at his ears, yet he could scarcely hear them. Wentworth lifted his head wearily.

"Yes, Kirk," he whispered hoarsely. "No, I'm not wounded. They stuck me with some sort of infernal drug. It kills a man of thirst . . . in two hours. If—if I'm not in time, Kirk!" Wentworth fought the dizziness in his brain. On the horizon, he could see the light glow above New

York City. Transiently, he thought he could make out even the rotating airplane beacons. "If I'm not in time. . . ." But he couldn't say this over the air. Laboriously, he brought his mind to the task of speaking in another language. Kirkpatrick knew French, a smattering of Gaelic. If he could manage in Gaelic. . . .

Wentworth translated phrases laboriously. "Take hypodermics filled with colorless solution atropine. Not strong enough to kill. Just strong enough to make throats dry. Inject the men named. Inject each one in a separate room and tell them I've landed from the pirate camp. Tell them I just died of some strange ailment, that you're injecting them with the drug to see if they know anything about it. Henshaw, Carlyle, Melville. Then watch them, Kirk, without being seen yourself. If one of them attempts to give himself an injection, *that man will be the leader of the pirates!"*

Kirkpatrick said crisply, "I'm taking this down on a dictaphone, Dick. Your Gaelic is too fast for me. I'll be able to make it out all right in a short while. I got your last sentence."

Wentworth smiled faintly. "Good, Kirk. . . ." He switched to Gaelic again. "If the man who injects himself has any more of the fluid he uses then left over, you might give Nita and me a shot. It will be the antidote for the drug that is killing us."

Kirkpatrick said some more words, but Wentworth couldn't seem to hear them. He did not cut off the radio. He didn't seem to have the strength. He turned toward Nita. In spite of the wet cloths and the water, her eyes had a glassy sheen.

Marian was working over her with wet cloths, pouring teaspoon doses of water into her throat. She turned a haggard face toward Wentworth.

"I heard what you said over the radio," she said crisply. "If there's any of that antidote left, I'll see that it's administered." She smiled faintly. "I'm Irish, too."

Wentworth matched her smile. A fit of dry, tearing coughing seized him.

He turned his bleary eyes ahead. The lights of New York were just beneath. LaGuardia Field. . . . Yes, he could see it now. It was smaller than a postage stamp, very far below. He reached out a shaking hand and cut off the rockets. The sudden silence was a shock. The plane began to dip toward the earth.

He said, thickly. "Dead stick landing . . . I'll . . . try. . . ."

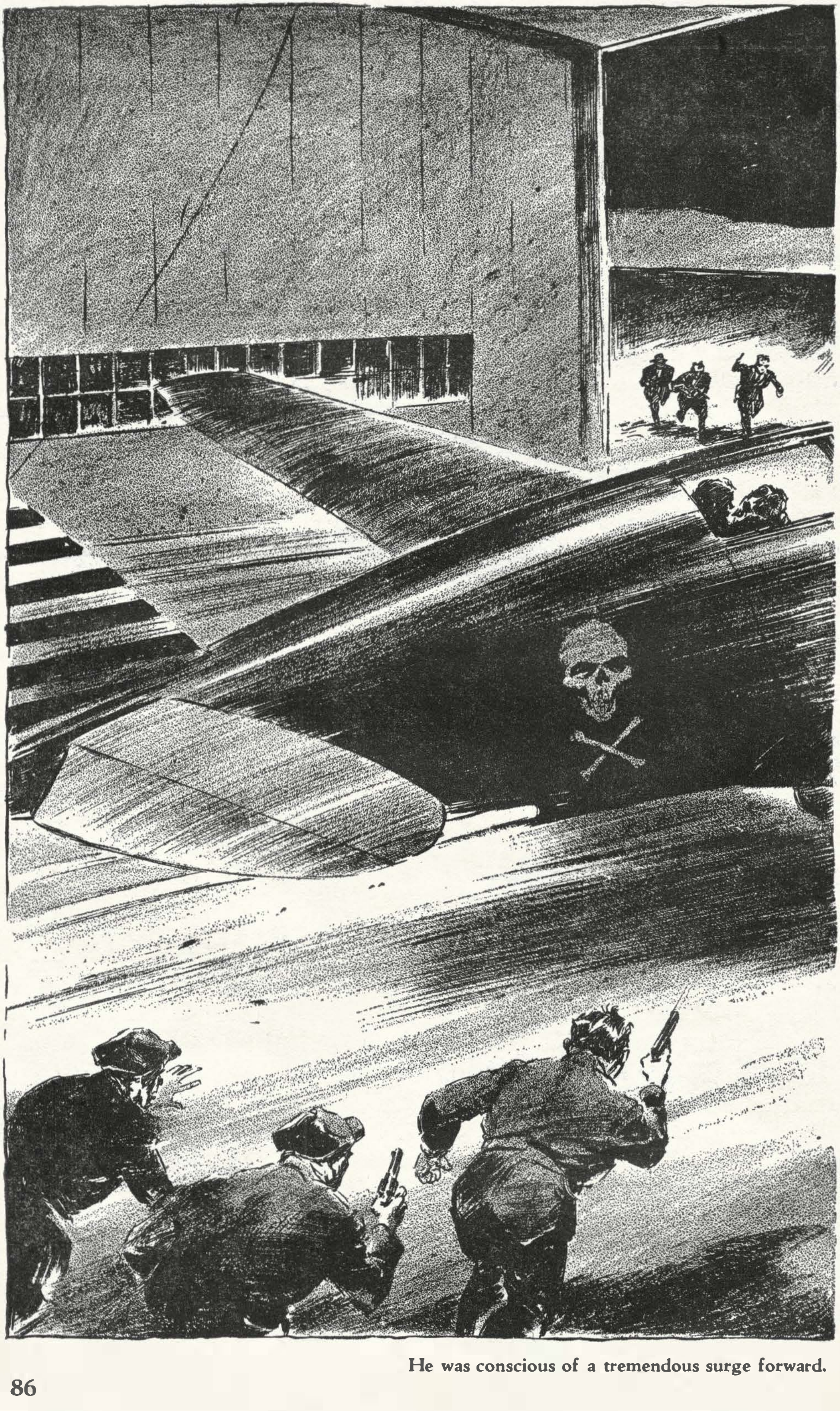
HE DIDN'T speak again. He hunched against the cushions. His eyes were so dry. He dabbed at them with the wet cloth. It helped a little, not much. His throat was agony.

The radio was squawking at him. It was the control man at the field. Marian reached behind Wentworth and snatched the microphone. He heard her voice dimly, saying things. Well, the field would be cleared. The crash wagon would be out. If he could only see clearly. . . .

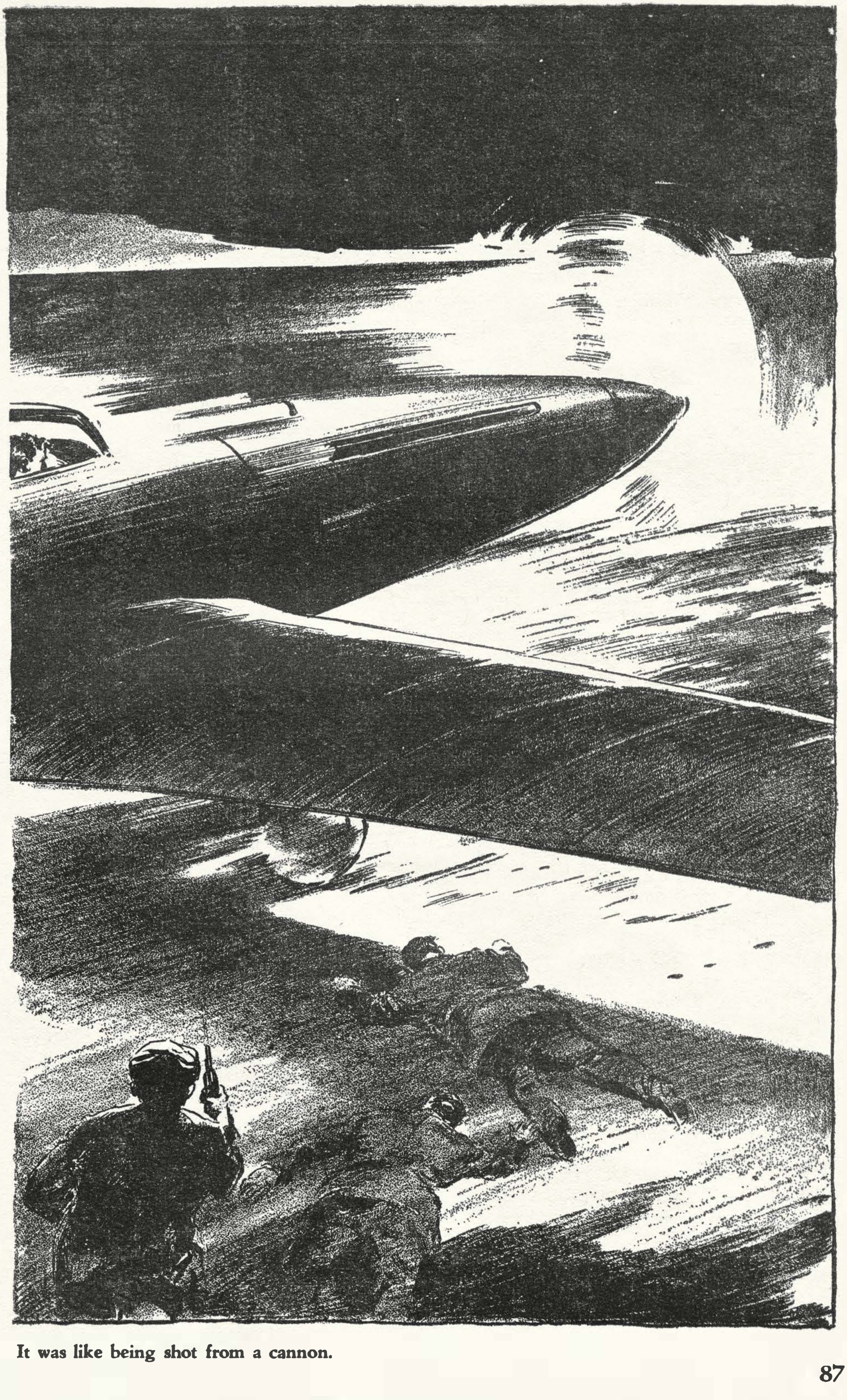
Wentworth pulled up his head and saw the field straight below him. He knew the ship was plunging downward in a dive that made the wind shriek against the wings. The props revolved slowly in the wind pressure. Curious how fast the field came up at him. Almost as if the ship were falling. Of course it was falling. That was the only way to get down fast enough. While he could still see.

The field was large now. He could see the white, illuminated stretches of the runways. Water all around. He would have to be careful not to hit the water.

A hand struck him in the face. Marian was shouting at him, slapping his face. Wentworth's head came up with a jerk. It was time. The field was a bare five hundred feet beneath him. Wentworth pulled back on the stick and the nose



He was conscious of a tremendous surge forward.



It was like being shot from a cannon.

came up swiftly. Too swiftly! He eased the stick forward again. The field swirled dizzily before his eyes. Wentworth wished the damned thing would stay still. Jumping around like that. Now the runway moved to the left of him, now to the right. He circled the field, lower. Now he was all set to land. . . . Not more than fifty feet up. Hold that normal glide. . . . It looked like fifty feet. Maybe a hundred. . . .

Wentworth fought for breath and another fit of dry coughing shook him. A slash of water struck across his face. He shook his head. A hangar was dead ahead of him!

Wentworth kicked the rudder, saw the field sweep dizzyingly beneath him. For a single instant his brain cleared. There would be no fire anyway. No ignition. He saw the runway skittering across his vision, kicked the rudder again and put the ship's nose down. The runway swept up to meet him. Too fast. Too fast. He eased back on the stick. He thought he did. Couldn't be sure. Couldn't see anything. He peered drunkenly forward, felt a jar run through the ship; another jar. He held the stick back. He. . . .

The world whirled. His neck snapped, but the cushions were deep, deep. . . . As deep and soft as night, and as black. Everything was black. . . . Light blazed blue-white and dazzling across his brain.

WENTWORTH realized, as the darkness began to fade from his brain, that actually he had never expected it to lift. He opened his eyes and saw the white ceiling of a hospital room. He swallowed, and it was painless. *Painless!*

Then he had licked the thirst drug!

Wentworth pushed himself up in bed and, at the window, Kirkpatrick's tall erect figure stood, hands clasped behind his back. He turned, and there was a smile on his lips.

"Hello, Dick," he said quietly. "Yes, Nita's all right. It was touch and go for a while, but you made a pretty swell landing all things considered."

Wentworth said, slowly, "But the thirst drug!"

Kirkpatrick was still smiling. "You realize, Dick, that you asked me to place my commissionership in jeopardy."

Wentworth nodded impatiently. "There was no other way," he said.

"You also gave us presumptive evidence that you are the *Spider,*" Kirkpatrick added, and his smile faded.

Wentworth brushed that aside. "There is always presumptive evidence," he said. "What happened . . . it was Melville, wasn't it?"

Kirkpatrick said grimly, "Yes, it was Melville. We caught him *before* he could give himself the antidote. And he talked. He confessed in full detail, in order to receive the antidote which he didn't need. His imagination turned the dry throat that atropine causes into the belief that he was dying of thirst. Yes, he confessed. But he says his men will identify you as the *Spider*, Dick."

Wentworth shrugged his shoulders. "The *Spider* was there all right," he agreed. "But when they found me, they didn't hunt any farther for him. As a matter of fact, I thought he had been killed. . . . I'll meet that when it comes. Melville is just trying to get revenge. What about those planes from Europe?"

"They didn't return," Kirkpatrick said slowly. "There was a story of ten reconnaisance planes shot down by English anti-aircraft fire. A storm forced them down pretty close to the ground. I don't think we need worry about them."

Wentworth lay back on his pillow and smiled up into Kirkpatrick's face. "Then everything is all right," he said quietly. "Melville has confessed, his men rounded up, the escaped rocket planes destroyed. . . . Yes, everything is beautifully all right."

Kirkpatrick frowned. But his hand, knuckling his mustache, hid his lips.

"What about Melville's testimony that you're the *Spider?*" he asked. "What about the confirmation of his men?"

Wentworth's smile did not falter. His voice was very quiet. "Kirk, do you think that matters?" he said. "The pirates no longer threaten humanity. I should be proud to be executed as the *Spider*—whether or not Justice had erred.

Kirkpatrick's hand dropped, and revealed his smile—which he promptly replaced with an expression of grave concern.

"Dick," he said, "I'll have to arrest you, but Melville won't testify against you, and neither will his men. Melville made a break and was shot to death. And the men at Fort Hell. . . . They must have had some nitro-glycerine there. A police bullet apparently set it off. No, they won't accuse you."

Wentworth said slowly, "Yes, there was nitro-glycerine there, I seem to remember." He frowned up into Kirkpatrick's face. "If there are no witnesses, how in hell can you arrest me?"

Kirkpatrick scowled. "Hmmm," he said. "Of course you're right, Dick—as usual. There is no one to prefer charges. But the *Spider's* day will come, Dick, and when it does—I'll be there to take him."

Wentworth said, "I understand the *Spider* considers you his toughest adversary."

Kirkpatrick disregarded the remark. "Let me tell you this, Dick: The destruction of the *Spider* will be an overwhelming loss to humanity. If only you'd promise me to work within the law, Dick, instead of beyond it—"

Wentworth's eyes were twinkling. "If only *I* would promise, Kirk? Aren't you a bit presumptuous? After all, *I* can't make promises for the *Spider,* although the next time I see him I'll be glad to—"

"You're incorrigible, Dick!" the Commissioner exploded. "And I suspect you're enjoying yourself at the expense of your best friend." He put out his hand and Dick clasped it warmly.

"If you boys will stop bickering," said Nita van Sloan, from the door, "I would be happy to join you." A nurse wheeled Nita into the room. She was pale, but love and admiration shone in her eyes as she surveyed the two greatest antagonists she had ever known.

THE END

TALES OF THE FUTURE OF SCIENCE

Jim Cragg sought the secret of the deadly air-bombs of the invading Gan hordes, and found, in an enemy cantina, the girl he loved and thought was dead. Don't miss Edwin K. Sloat's "The Deadly Swarm," complete in the August issue.

10¢ ASTONISHING STORIES

On sale June 25th

DEATH RIDES THE MIDNIGHT PATROL!

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August Issue Now On Sale

G-8 and His BATTLE ACES

TWO months have passed since I asked for a few, well—confessions. Remember? I requested all of you frankly to tell me if Dick Wentworth's honor code had ever influenced you. This time I have space to pass along just one. Here it is!

Brooklyn,
New York

Dear Chief:

I have been hesitating to write this letter, for two reasons. First, I was so ashamed about everything that I hated to tell you of it. Second, I am only twelve years old and don't know if you would be interested in a kid's troubles. Then I thought maybe you could print the letter without giving my last name, so I decided to write it.

My father has been out of work for quite a while, and the relief checks were not large enough for father to buy presents with. But it seemed very sad for baseball season to come along—and find me without a glove. We have a team in the neighborhood, but you have got to have a glove to play.

Well, I stole a glove. It was lying right on the front porch where a friend of mine lives, and his father has a good steady job. I wondered how I could play on the team without this boy finding out, because he played on the team too. So I found some shoe dye at home and I dyed the glove a dark brown. And I took off the label. Then I hid it in the attic for a few days. In the meantime I read the Web, and you asked that question about Dick Wentworth, who is so upright and honest and all. Did he ever influence any of us readers? I began to feel very bad, because here was a chance for me to correct a wrong. For a couple of nights I couldn't sleep very good. I made up my mind to give the glove back and confess.

I went to the boy's house and gave it to him, and while we were talking, his father came in. He said, "Well, this will teach both of you a lesson. Jack had no business leaving his glove where it could be stolen—and you had no right taking it." I was very scared, but I felt better just the same. Finally Jack's father said, "I'll make a deal with you fellows. You clean out the cellar and tidy up the back yard. Mow the lawn every Saturday for a month, and you will earn a glove apiece—a new one for Jack, and the old one for you."

At the end of the month, he gave me back the glove—and it was really mine now. And Jack got a new one. I wouldn't sell my glove for anything—it means so much to me. And actually, I must thank Dick Wentworth!

Sincerely,
Robert W.

P.S.—Jack reads the *Spider* now, too!

Well, Bob W., I liked your letter better than any others, and let me say right now that I am indeed interested in the troubles of a twelve-year-old! If only adults would realize more fully how serious things become to a guy your age! You will never forget that incident as long as you live, for you took your medicine and found out that honesty is the only thing that pays off! I might add that Jack's father was a very understanding man. I take off my hat to him—and to you, too!

I hope some other readers will be inspired by Bob's letter. Confession is good for the soul.

This seems like a good time to offer a word to the wise. You have all noticed indications of hectic efforts in certain localities to stamp out Fifth Column activities in America. Unquestionably, the Fifth Column exists here, and organizations are being formed to fight it. One club of patriots called themselves the Sixth Column. I admire their spirit, and I heartily subscribe to it, but I must remind you that thousands of German-Americans are as staunch supporters of our democracy as Mayflower descendants. Therefore, may your judgment be keen; may it be tempered with humaneness, lest you unjustly persecute the innocent!

The Chief.

JOIN THE UNITED FRONT AGAINST CRIME!

. . And Wear the Red and Black Emblem of the Spider Army . .

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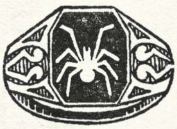

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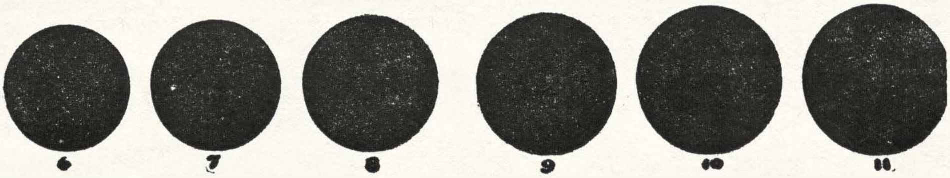


Murder's One-Man Show

Dramatic "Ed Race" Novelette

by

Emile C. Tepperman

It was only a tiny scrap of canvas—yet it widowed a cop's new bride, made a millionairess into a thief—and framed Ed Race, the Masked Marksman, into a murder picture calling for more deadly accurate shooting than had ever thrilled Ed's theater-going fans!

CHAPTER ONE

Girl in the Gallery

THE girl was wearing a neat, tailored blue suit and a high-necked blouse of white silk. She was dark-haired, her legs were shapely, and she was slim and attractive.

Ed Race noticed all these things about her as she came running down the steps of the Lawrence Art Gallery on Fifty-seventh Street. He stopped short on the sidewalk, because he saw that if she continued down at the speed with which she was coming, she would bump into him. She couldn't see Ed, because she was looking behind her as she ran.

Ed wondered what there could be inside of the Lawrence Galleries which could have frightened her so. And then she tripped on the next to the last step, and fell right into his arms.

Her body was soft and fragrant, but she suddenly squirmed and fought like a little wildcat. Ed could see that she was both startled and terrified, and that her violent effort to get free was a reaction from the suddenness of her fall into his arms. He grinned, and set her down on her feet. She was breathing hard, and throwing apprehensive glances back toward the entrance of the Lawrence Galleries.

She straightened her coat, and smoothed down the disarranged blouse over her heaving bosom, and then smiled up uncertainly at Ed.

"Oh—I—I'm so sorry. I was startled—"

"That's all right," said Ed.

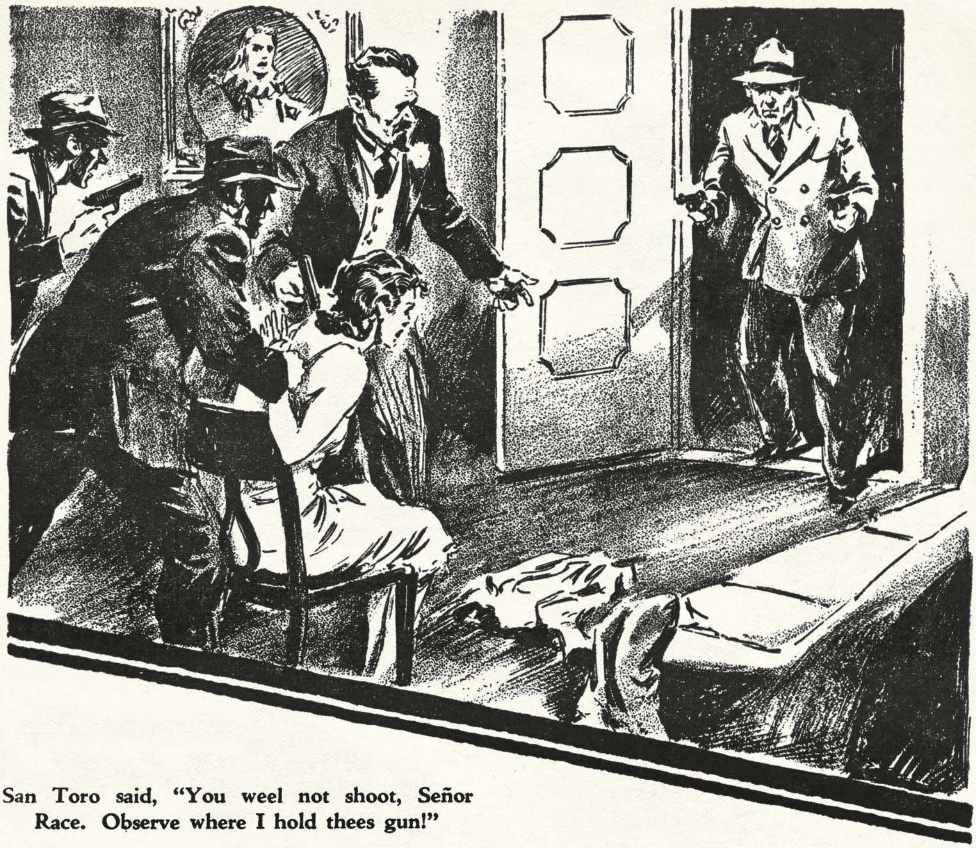
Impulsively, she put a hand on his arm. "Would—would you help me?"

"If I can."

Once more she threw a hasty glance toward the doorway out of which she had come running. "A—a nasty man was annoying me—in there. He's following me out. Would—would you—stop him?"

"Of course," Ed told her. "Here he comes now. You run along, and I'll just give him a little lecture—"

He stopped, and began to grin once more. The man who had been pursuing



San Toro said, "You weel not shoot, Señor Race. Observe where I hold thees gun!"

the young lady appeared in the doorway and came down the stairs on the run. And Ed knew him by sight. He was Second Grade Detective Joe Griscomb, attached to the Forty-seventh Street Police Station. The Clyde Theatre, where Ed staged his Masked Marksman show twice a day, was in this precinct, and he knew every one of the plainclothesmen in the district. Twice a day he startled the packed audiences of the Clyde with the wizardy of his gun-juggling and markmanship act. But outside the theatre, he had another avocation which had often brought him in close touch with the police.

That avocation was criminology. He held licenses to operate as a private detective in a dozen states, and his friend, Inspector MacSpain, had often said that Ed attracted trouble the way jam attracts flies. Truly, he had often found worthy use for the two heavy forty-five calibre hair-trigger revolvers which he always carried in his shoulder holsters.

But tonight, he wasn't sure whether this was going to be comedy or tragedy. He was quite sure that Detective Joe Griscomb hadn't tried to force his attentions on this girl—pretty though she was. For Griscomb was a young detective who was head-over-heels in love with his new bride.

Ed looked down at the girl, studying her quizzically.

"So!" he said. "This is the man who was annoying you, eh?"

"Yes!" she gasped. "Please keep him here till I get away—"

She started to run, and Detective Griscomb shouted, "Hey, Mr. Race! Hold her!"

HE TOOK the rest of the steps down to the street in a flying leap, and Ed grasped the girl's arm. She tried to twist out of his hold, but Griscomb reached her and put a hand on her shoulder.

"All right, young lady," he growled. "You're under arrest!"

He turned to Ed. "She just stole a picture out of the gallery. Cut it out of the frame with a razor blade. There was a painting stolen last week, too, and I was watching for the thief to come back and try again!"

The girl stamped her foot angrily. "That's ridiculous! I'll sue you! How dare you accuse me of stealing a picture? You can see I haven't anything—"

She turned appealingly to Ed. "Don't believe a word he says. He was trying to date me up, in there, and now he's trying to make a lame excuse. Think of it—accusing *me* of being a thief!"

Her face was flushed, and her eyes flashed angrily—so angrily that Ed was tempted to believe her innocent.

But Joe Griscomb laughed harshly. "That painting was only ten inches square. It's a nude by that new artist, Pasquale Manuel. It's worth fifty thousand dollars. You tucked it somewhere in your clothes. Lady, you're going to be searched by a matron!"

He reached for her handbag, which was tucked under her arm.

"Here. Let's see what's in here—"

Griscomb's hand was still on her shoulder, and as he took the bag out from under her arm she suddenly bent her head and sank her teeth in the fleshy part of his hand. The detective gasped with the sudden pain, and yanked his hand away.

The minute she was free, the girl turned and ran.

Griscomb cursed under his breath, dropped the purse, and started after her.

The purse fell to the ground at Ed Race's feet. Ed didn't join in the pursuit. He felt that Joe Griscomb should be amply able to handle that girl, and the purse presented a subject of greater interest at the moment. For two cars had just come cruising down the street. They were both grey, two-door coaches, and alike as two peas, including license plates muddied over so to be indistinguishable. One of these cars pulled in at the curb, while the other kept going in the direction of the fleeing girl and Joe Griscomb.

Out of the car which had stopped, there stepped a tall, distinguished looking gentleman in a Prince Albert, with striped pants and a cane. He wore a moustache and a goatee, and had the appearance of a Spanish grandee, or of a foreign ambassador. This gentleman hurriedly stooped to pick up the purse which the girl had dropped.

The purse was half a dozen feet from Ed, quite close to the curb. Ed's eyes narrowed. He stepped forward quickly, and put his foot on the purse, just as the foreign looking gentleman was about to grasp it.

"Better leave it alone, mister," Ed said mildly.

The gentleman straightened up, frowning, without lifting the purse. "Excuse, please," he murmured. "You weel kindly to take thee foot from thee purse. Eet ees thee purse of my wife, which she 'ave drop."

Ed raised his eyebrows. "You mean to say that little girl who's running away is your wife?"

"But yes, señor. An' now—"

He stooped once more to pick it up.

Ed kept his foot on it. "You know," he said, "I think you're a liar!"

THE foreign looking gentleman muttered an oath. He turned to the car from which he had descended. A swarthy fellow, also in a Prince Albert, was sitting at the wheel.

"Juan," the bearded gentleman said to this swarthy one, "thees man 'ere—'e make trouble!"

Juan's lips parted in a grin. "Oho! We shall see!" His hand rose from the cushioned seat, gripping a huge, wide-mouthed revolver. He swung it toward Ed.

Now, for the first time, Ed Race began to take more than an impersonal interest in the proceedings. His reaction—at first—had been the same as that of a bored man-about-town at a summer resort, who suddenly spots a pretty girl in the hotel. Only with Ed, it was the scent of danger which provided the stimulus. Ed could appreciate a pretty girl as well as the next man. But give him the choice between the charming company of the most beautiful woman in the world, and a night spent matching wits and guns with the underworld of crime—and Ed would always choose the latter.

It was one of the reasons why he had never married. For he knew in his heart that if a call came from a friend at crime's mercy on his wedding night, he'd forsake the honeymoon.

So now, when he saw the big gun in Juan's hand, it was almost with a feeling of pleasure that he went into action.

The chances were that neither Juan nor the bearded gentleman were able to tell just what happened. On the stage of the Clyde Theatre, the Masked Marskman gave a nightly demonstration of the same swift draw which he now executed. He did it while going into a back somersault, with his hands empty. The audience usually let out a long gasp of surprise when they saw him coming back on his feet—with a gun in each hand. Then they gasped again as the two guns blasted out thunderously, snapping out the flames of a row of candles, thirty feet across the stage.

So perhaps Juan uttered a gasp when he saw the flicker of motion made by Ed's hand, and then felt the searing thud of a bullet into the fleshy part of his shoulder. Certain it is that he never saw the heavy forty-five come out of the holster.

Ed fired only once, to disable the man. At the same instant, he thrust out with his left hand against the chest of the bearded gentleman, sending him sprawling into the side of the car. Then he stooped and snatched the purse from the ground. He had no fear that Juan would pick up the revolver and shoot with his left hand, for he knew just how much shock can be conveyed to a man's body by the impact of a forty-five calibre slug.

He stuffed the purse in his pocket, and at the same time he heard the staccato *rat-tat-tat* of a machine gun around the corner. The girl had disappeared around that corner, with Joe Griscomb chasing her—and so had the second of the two identical cars.

Ed cursed under his breath, and set off at a run toward the corner.

The rattle of the machine gun ceased suddenly and was replaced by a woman's scream. Ed couldn't be sure, but he thought he recognized the voice of that girl. He sprinted forward, and a bullet fanned his cheek from behind. Ed didn't even turn to look. He wanted to get around the corner and see what had happened to Joe Griscomb.

The girl's scream was repeated once more, while he was still twenty feet from the end of the block. And at the same time, a second bullet whined through the air, almost biting his shoulder. Indeed, it came so close that he thought the cloth of his coat must be scorched.

Still, he did not take the time to turn and shoot back. Either Juan, or the bearded gentleman with the Spanish accent, was trying to get him in the back, and the next try might be a good one.

His legs were ramming up and down like pistons when he rounded that corner—just in time to see the grey coach roaring away down at the far end of the block, with the door swinging open, and two figures struggling, half inside and half out on the running board. One of them was a thick-set man, and the other was the girl who had stolen the painting. The thick-set man was trying to drag her inside, and the girl was trying to break his grip and jump from the racing car.

CHAPTER TWO

Ed Race—Killer!

THE girl was mad, for if she did break the stocky man's hold, she would go catapulting from that speeding auto with an impetus that would surely smash her body to pulp.

Ed could have hit that man easily with a snap shot, even in the moving car. His narrowed eyes were centered on the fellow's mop of black hair which hung down over his forehead as he struggled with the girl, and Ed could have put a bullet right square in the center of his forehead. But to do so would have meant certain death for the girl, as well. So he held his fire, and the next instant the car had swung around the corner and was gone.

Ed turned swiftly to the body of Detective Joe Griscomb, lying in a pool of blood on the sidewalk.

The single burst of machine gun slugs had filled the young detective's chest full of lead. He would never again come home to his bride.

A gust of fury swept through Ed Race. Whoever these picture crooks were, they had not hesitated to kill in order to recover their loot. For the sake of a piece of canvas ten inches square, young Joe Griscomb was lying dead now, and his new bride was a widow.

Ed whirled to retrace his steps around the corner. There might be a chance yet to catch Juan and the bearded man. But he had hardly taken two steps before a siren screamed almost in his ear, and a police car raced up alongside him with squealing brakes and scorched tires. A police sergeant leaped out of the car with service revolver in hand, and leveled it at Ed.

"Drop that gun, you!" he barked. "Drop it or I'll drill you!"

Ed froze where he was. He could understand the sergeant's mistake. There was the dead body of Joe Griscomb on the ground, and here was he, with a revolver in his hand.

Ed knew this fellow. He was Luke Morrison, who had recently been transferred to the precinct from the headquarters squad, and who was so officious and blustering that he had made himself obnoxious to everybody in the district.

"I can't drop this gun, Morrison," Ed said. "You know damned well it's a hair-trigger. If I drop it, it'll go off."

Morrison came forward, peering at Ed's face.

"Oh," he grunted. "So it's you, is it? Who'd you kill this time?"

He bent for a moment over the body of Griscomb, and then straightened, his beefy face growing purple. His eyes became specks of rage.

"So you're a cop-killer now, huh!" he came over and extended his hand, palm up, at the same time pointing his service revolver at Ed's stomach.

"Let's have that gun of yours!"

Ed did not surrender his forty-five. Instead, he deliberately returned it to its holster.

"Don't be a fool, Morrison," he said in a low voice. "You can see that poor Griscomb was killed by a machine gun—"

"Yeah," said Morrison. "I see. I also see that you were scramming away from here when we pulled up. Daly saw you scramming, too!" He jerked his head in the direction of Patrolman Daly, the driver of the police car, who had scrambled out by this time.

Sergeant Morrison kept his eyes on Ed, but spoke over his shoulder to the patrolman. "You're a witness, Daly. You saw him running away."

"That's right, Sergeant," Daly said reluctantly. "But Mr. Race is no murderer.

He's a friend of Inspector MacSpain—"

"Never mind that!" Morrison exploded savagely. "MacSpain is on vacation, and can't do him any good. The fact is, we caught him in the act of running away from the scene of a murder. That's enough to hold anybody on—"

"Damn it, Morrison," Ed protested, "I was trying to catch the killer's accomplices. There were two cars—"

"Sez you!" Morrison sneered. "Suppose it was the other way around? Suppose you were in cahoots with the killer—"

"You're crazy!" Ed exclaimed. "I can prove what I say. There was a girl whom Joe Griscomb was after. She stole a painting out of the Lawrence Galleries around the corner, and Joe chased her—"

He stopped, his eyes widening in amazement. Coming from around the corner, there appeared the gentleman in the Prince Albert, with the moustache and the goatee. He was carrying a gold-knobbed cane now, and he was hurrying. At sight of the group around Griscomb's body, he waved his cane and shouted, "Ah! I see zat you 'ave catch thee criminal! *Bueno!*"

MORRISON moved around a little, so he could see the new arrival, and still keep Ed covered.

"Who're you?" he demanded.

The bearded gentleman bowed from the hips. "Permit me! I am thee Señor Felipe de San Toro. My apartment—eet ees opposite to thee Lawrence Galleries. From my window I 'ave see 'ow thees man—" indicating Ed— " 'ave snatch thee purse of a woman, an' thee detective 'ave chase 'im. Then 'ave come thee car weeth thee machine gun, an' thees man 'ave call to those in the car to shoot thee detective. Thee detective 'ave start to run around thees corner, but those een thee car 'ave keel 'im. I 'ave become dress very queek, an' 'ave come down to tell all thees!"

"Ah!" Morrison said triumphantly. "Thanks very much, Mr. Sam Toro. You don't know how much I appreciate this!" He smirked at Ed. "Well, Mr. Masked Marksman, what have you got to say now? Here's a man who testifies he saw you give the word to gun Griscomb!"

"He's a damned liar!" Ed exclaimed. "He's one of the crooks. The girl stole a painting from the Lawrence Galleries, and then San Toro's accomplices killed Joe and kidnaped the girl—"

"But no!" interrupted San Toro. "I am insult'! 'E 'ave taken thee purse of the woman!"

Morrison eyed Ed narrowly. "What about that, Race? Have you got the purse? If you have it, you might as well admit it, because you'll be searched."

"Good Lord!" Ed protested. "You can't believe a cock-and-bull story like that—"

"*Your* story sounds more like cock-and-bull," Morrison broke in. "Now answer yes or no—*have you got that purse?*"

Ed sighed. "Yes—"

"Aha! So you admit everything! You're under arrest—"

"Wait, Morrison! I tell you, that girl stole a painting, and Griscomb was chasing her. This San Toro was in a car with another man, whom I shot—"

"Well, well!" Morrison sneered. "So now you admit you shot some one!"

"Certainly. You didn't give me a chance to explain—"

"You'll have all the chance you want—before a jury! Come on, now. We'll check on this fairy tale of yours about a girl stealing a painting from the Lawrence Galleries!" He took Ed's arm in a steely grip, and motioned to San Toro to come along. "Stay here," he ordered Daly, "and keep the crowd from touching the body."

A small crowd had gathered, and they watched in silence as Morrison led Ed Race around the corner, with the Señor Felipe de San Toro talking volubly, explaining how shocked and horrified he had been at witnessing the brutal attack in the street.

Ed Race refrained from talking. He saw that it was useless to attempt to make any explanations to Sergeant Morrison. Whatever he could say would be a waste of time. The only thing that would tend to support his story would be the missing picture in the gallery.

The Lawrence Galleries seemed to be entirely quiet and undisturbed by the events which had taken place. It was a private salon for the exhibition of paintings, and there were never many people there at any one time. Their sales ran into large sums of money, so that they did not need to do a volume of business.

There was a short hall, which opened directly into the exhibition gallery, and at the doorway to the room there was a small gilt sign which read, PLEASE RING FOR ATTENDANT.

Morrison grunted, and stuck a thumb on the bell. They heard it ringing somewhere in an inner office. The exhibition room contained perhaps thirty oil paintings, and fifteen or twenty etchings, displayed artistically along the walls. Ed glanced around swiftly, trying to spot the empty frame from which the girl had cut the small canvas. But he was interrupted by the appearance of Westley Lawrence, the proprietor, from the rear office.

CHAPTER THREE

Joe Griscomb's Widow

LAWRENCE was a small, bird-like man with large blue eyes, and a weak chin. He smiled ingratiatingly when he saw Señor Felipe de San Toro, but frowned in the direction of Ed and Morrison, as if wondering what these interlopers were doing in the sacred precincts of his premises.

"Ah, Señor de San Toro," he exclaimed. "It is indeed a pleasure to see you tonight. I hope you have decided to purchase the Manuel. At fifty thousand dollars, I assure you it is an unqualified bargain—"

Señor de San Toro waved his hand deprecatingly.

"Later, Señor Lawrence. We 'ave another matter now."

He turned to Morrison. "You see, eet ees that I am a good customer of Señor Lawrence. In Spain, I 'ave a great art collection. I buy many paintings een thees countree—"

"Never mind that now," Ed broke in. He addressed the gallery proprietor. "Look here, Mr. Lawrence. Did you have a detective guarding these premises."

Lawrence frowned, and nodded. "Indeed, yes. There was a Detective Griscomb here, but I do not see him. A painting was stolen last week, and I asked for a police guard—"

"How about the painting that was just stolen?" Race demanded. "A small one, ten inches square, and worth fifty thousand dollars!"

Lawrence jerked to attention. "Stolen? My God! That would be the Manuel—the one I'm trying to sell to Señor San Toro. Stolen, you say? Impossible. Let me see—"

He hurried across the room, with the others trailing him. On the far wall, with a small electric light bulb directed upon it, hung the smallest oil painting Ed had ever seen. It was enclosed in a simple black frame, and depicted a nude dancer about to do a pirouette, with her arms high in the air. Every line of the dancer's slim and supple body expressed grace and beauty, and movement. There was something almost ethereal about her body, which was creamy white and pink against a background of rich purple draperies.

"You see!" exclaimed Westley Lawrence. "It is not stolen." He wagged a finger in Ed's face. "What sort of nightmares do you dream? Who told you it

(Continued on page 100)

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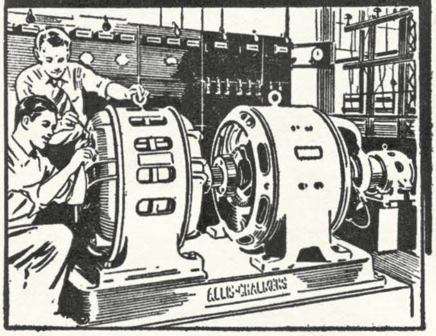

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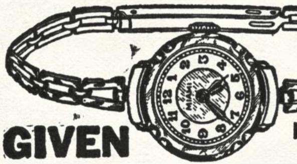

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(Continued from page 98)

was stolen?" He turned around to San Toro. "Here it is, Señor de San Toro, in all its beauty. The smallest canvas in the world, by the newest genius among painters, Pasquale Manuel. See the perfection of detail, the magnificence of the color—"

Ed wasn't listening. He was staring, almost incredulously, at the painting. This was it, without a doubt, for Griscomb had said that it was ten inches square, and this one exactly fitted the size. Had Griscomb lied then? Or were there two such paintings in the Lawrence Galleries?

But far overshadowing even that conjecture in Ed's mind, was another fact—*the nude dancer in that painting was the girl who had fallen into his arms a few minutes before!*

The face which peered out at him from that rich miniature canvas was the face of that girl. And if he was any judge of feminine form, the body was hers, in size and contour. She had posed for this picture!

Ed ran a hand over his forehead. The girl had certainly been running away when she fell into his arms, off the gallery steps. Joe Griscomb had accused her of stealing this portrait, and to avoid being searched she had bitten the detective's hand and run away. And yet—here was the picture, intact! Was it possible that the girl had been telling the truth, and that Griscomb had really been trying to annoy her?

He snapped to attention as Sergeant Morrison produced a set of handcuffs.

"Well, Mr. Masked Marksman, it looks like you're in this thing, right up to your neck! Your story has been proved a lie, all the way down the line! First you claim that Mr. San Toro, here, was in with the killers, and it turns out he's a wealthy man and a customer of the Lawrence Galleries. Then you claim a girl stole a picture, and it turns out that the picture is right here!"

He thrust out the handcuffs. "Let's

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have your mitts, Mr. Masked Marksman! You're going in the can—on a charge of complicity in murder!"

ED RACE had never been one to kid himself. He saw the seriousness of his situation now. Morrison would, of course, have to establish a motive on Ed Race's part, if he wanted to convict him of being involved in the killing of Joe Griscomb. But Ed knew just how they would handle a man in headquarters, who was accused of killing a cop. Also, he was beginning to feel that this case would take a little high-powered investigating on his part. He realized that he was up against a pretty clever man in the person of the Senor Felipe de San Toro. In jail, Ed wouldn't have the ghost of a chance to get to the bottom of the queer business. And in the meantime, who could tell what would happen to that girl? He was sure that she had been kidnaped by San Toro's accomplices. Whether she had stolen a picture or not, he didn't know right now. But he meant to find out.

So the first thing that happened while Morrison was extending the handcuffs, was that Ed's hand seemed to make a *whirring* motion in the air, and suddenly, the barrel of one of his heavy forty-fives was descending upon Morrison's wrist.

He didn't hit any too hard, because he was reluctant to do permanent damage to a cop—even to one like Morrison. But the blow was sufficient to smack the revolver out of the detective sergeant's hand. Then, almost in the same motion, Ed brought the forty-five up, and the barrel clicked lightly against the point of Morrison's chin. The sergeant's head jerked back, and his eyes glazed. His jaw went slack, and he toppled slowly forward.

Ed caught him, and eased him down to the ground, then sprang up. His idea was to get Senor de San Toro off by himself somewhere, and give the Spanish gentleman a thorough grilling.

But Senor de San Toro was apparently no slouch as far as quick thinking went. He had no desire, it seemed, to be present in the same room with Ed Race—without the protection of the police. While Ed was lowering the unconscious form of Morrison to the floor, San Toro turned and ran headlong out of the exhibition room, shouting with all the power of his lungs.

"'Elp! Police! Thee murderer 'ave escape'!"

Westley Lawrence stood ringing his hands in panic, and staring wide-eyed at the big gun in Ed's hand. San Toro's voice came rumbling back to them from the street, shouting ever higher and higher.

Ed cursed under his breath. There would be other policemen out there now, and they'd be swarming in here in a moment. He swung the gun on Westley Lawrence, making his face as ferocious as possible.

"I'm a desperate man, Lawrence," he growled. "Do you want me to put a slug right in your guts?"

"N-no! P-please—"

"All right then. Show me the back way out of here—quick!"

Shaking all over, Lawrence led him through the rear, and out to the back entrance. Already, there were the sounds of running footsteps at the front of the building, and Ed could hear San Toro's voice.

"'E mus' be escape by thee back way—"

Ed gripped Lawrence's arm tightly. "Look here," he demanded. "Are you sure nothing was stolen from the gallery tonight?"

"Y-yes!" the little man quaked. "N-nothing was t-taken—"

"Are you sure that Manuel painting is the original? Sure it wasn't switched?"

"I—I didn't look c-carefully. B-but it seems to be the same—"

"All right. I want you to go and examine it with a microscope. I'll call you on the telephone, in a half hour. Let me know what you find out. And remember—if you tell the police I'm going to phone you, I'll come back and blast your front teeth into the back of your head!"

Making his face look as murderous as he could, he shoved Lawrence backward into the hall, and sprang out of the back door into the rear alley, just as San Toro's voice came more clearly than ever from the exhibition room.

ED sped along the alley, and as he got out into the next street, he caught the high-pitched voice of Westley Lawrence yelling that the murderer had threatened to fill his guts with lead.

Ed grinned thinly in the darkness. He crossed the street, cut through another alley, worked over toward the avenue, and hailed a cab. He gave an address on Ninety-fourth Street, which was where Joe Griscomb lived.

As the cab sped uptown, Ed took the purse from his pocket and examined it. He whistled when he saw the contents. He had thought that possibly he might find the folded canvas in here, but there was no stolen painting in the purse. It contained a driver's license and a passport, both in the name of Georgette Vaughn. The picture on the passport was that of the girl who had posed for the Manuel painting—and who had been accused by Joe Griscomb of stealing it.

In addition to the usual feminine accessories, there was a roll of bills containing almost nine hundred dollars, and a checkbook on the National City Bank. The address of Georgette Vaughn was given in the driver's license as the Greymont Towers, on Fifty-seventh Street, which was one of the swankiest residence buildings in town. There was also a small, engraved calling card, with a beautiful crest in one corner, and the name: *"Señor Felipe Miguel de San Toro y Moroja"*

On the back of the calling card there was scribbled: *"Lawrence Galleries, 10 P. M.—we shall await you outside, dear lady, and protect you!"*

There was no signature to this gallant note but Ed's eyes flickered. He was willing to bet that the handwriting would turn out to be that of Señor de San Toro.

Ed put all the things back in the purse, with a perplexed frown creasing his forehead. The name of Georgette Vaughn was familiar to him. He recalled that she had been in the newspapers on numerous occasions. Her maiden name had been Georgette Ross, and she had been a sort of madcap debutante a couple of years ago. The papers usually had a good time recording her pranks. Then she had married the millionaire, Roger Vaughn, and had gone on leading a careless and expensive life. Ed remembered hearing one of the gossip columnists on the radio report that Georgette was now separated from her husband. It was quite believable that she would pose in the nude for a Spanish painter. She was bound by no conventions. But he couldn't imagine her trying to steal the picture later.

He remembered vividly now, the moment when he had rounded the corner and seen her struggling in the car with the stocky man whose black hair came down over his forehead. There was no doubt that she had been kidnaped—either for ransom, or for the purpose of getting that portrait, which they must also have believed she had stolen. San Toro must have tried to get the purse, just to make sure she hadn't hidden it in there. Or, perhaps, he had merely wanted to get his card back. That card might be valuable later.

The cab stopped in front of the apartment house where Joe Griscomb lived, and just then the radio switched from music to a news announcer: " . . . *Ed Race, a vaudeville actor, wanted for complicity in the murder of Detective Griscomb . . . police are working on the case. . . .*"

(Continued on page 104)

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THE SPIDER

(Continued from page 102)

ED LET the radio go on. He told the driver to wait, and took the self-service elevator up to the fourth floor. The door of 4-C was unlocked. Under the bell there was a neatly typed card bearing the name, "Griscomb." Ed could hear Mary Griscomb in the foyer, talking on the telephone. Her voice was choked with emotion.

"Is—is he—dead? Please tell me. . . . I can't believe it. . . . Ed Race? God, no. Ed was Joe's friend . . . you're sure, Sergeant Morrison? All right—I—I'll come right downtown. . . ."

Ed heard her hang up and utter a choked sob. He pushed the door open and stepped into the foyer.

Mary Griscomb was standing, white-faced and taut, at the telephone table. She had been married only three weeks—and now she was getting the news which policemen's wives live constantly in dread of hearing. Her eyes widened at sight of Ed Race, and her hands clenched.

"You!" she said.

Ed came in slowly.

"Yes, Mary. It's I. They—told you about Joe?"

"They—told me."

"They said I killed him?"

"They said you—are responsible. Morrison has a witness—who heard you order the machine gunner to shoot Joe down!"

Ed came a little closer to her.

"Mary, do you believe that? Do you believe I had anything to do with killing Joe?"

Her breast was heaving, and her fingernails were biting into the palms of her clenched hands. She was making a terrible effort to control herself.

For a long tense, minute, she looked straight into Ed's eyes, looked deep and searchingly, with all the poignant discernment of a bereaved woman. At last she took a deep breath.

"No, Ed," she whispered. "I—don't—believe it!"

Ed breathed a deep sigh. Gently he took her arm, and led her to a seat in the living room. Then he told her the whole story of how Joe Griscomb had died—omitting nothing. She listened, dry-eyed, tense, every fibre of her trembling. When he was done, she closed her eyes, sat that way for a long minute. Then she opened them, and looked straight at him.

"What are you going to do, Ed?"

"I'm going to find that black-haired man. I'm going to find where they've taken Georgette Vaughn. I'm going to get the goods on San Toro, and prove he's the brains behind the conspiracy—whatever its purpose!"

"But—but how can you do all that—with the police on your trail?"

"I'll do it, all right! It'll be hard. With MacSpain away on his vacation, there's no one I can go to, in the department. I can't ask anyone else to take a chance on being involved with me. Mac would do it, without my asking twice. But now—I'll have to work alone."

"Not alone, Ed," Mary Griscomb whisperer. "I'm going with you. I'm going to help you find Joe's murderer!" She stood up, and there was fire in her eyes. "I'm sure Joe would want me to do it—rather than go down to the morgue and look helplessly at his body. I'm sure that's the way a policeman's wife should act!"

Ed pressed her hand. "Good girl!"

Together they went downstairs.

CHAPTER FOUR

Penthouse Trap

THERE was no longer a crowd in front of the Lawrence Galleries. The body of Joe Griscomb had been removed from around the corner, and only one uniformed policeman stood on guard in front of the Gallery entrance.

Ed told the cab driver to stop a little further up the block, and pointed out to Mary Griscomb the apartment house across the street, where Señor de San Toro had said he resided.

They got out, telling the cab driver to wait again, and walked swiftly toward the building. It was a small, remodelled house, with two flats on a floor. The names in the bells indicated that San Toro lived in an apartment on the first floor.

Mary followed Ed upstairs, and he carefuly tried the door. It was locked. He whispered instructions to Mary, and she nodded understanding. He backed against the wall, out of sight of anyone opening from within, and Mary knocked diffidently on the door.

There was no answer, and she knocked again.

This time there was the sound of movement from within, and a muffled voice demanded, "Well? Who?"

"It—it's about the picture," Mary said, through the door. "I must see you at once, Señor San Toro."

There was a grumbled response, and the door came open a crack.

Mary bent and peered through the crack, and whispered, "There's no chain. Ed."

"Good!" Ed said. He came out from alongside the wall, and hurled his weight at the door.

Surprisingly, it gave easily before his onslaught, as if the party on the other side had taken the precaution to step out of the way.

Too late, Ed knew he had thrust himself into a trap. He went hurtling into the hallway, and some one clicked a switch, and the light went on.

Detective Sergeant Morrison's gleeful voice said, "All right, Race, I knew you'd show up here sooner or later. Get your mitts up!"

A bitter feeling of failure throbbed

through Ed Race's pulse, even as he went stumbling forward down the length of the hall. He should have known better than to come here. Morrison had outguessed him. He had expected to find only San Toro, and perhaps some of his murderous friends here. Instead, he found that Morrison had been lying in wait for him. And where he would have been eager to shoot it out with San Toro and his friends, he could not shoot at Morrison. If he allowed himself to be captured now, San Toro would have the field all to himself. With Georgette Vaughn in his hands, the wily Spaniard could proceed to frame a perfect case against Ed, and at the same time accomplish his own ends without hindrance.

Ed had trained himself to think clearly and accurately while in violent motion. It had been necessary to acquire this facility, because both accuracy of judgment and of markmanship were demanded in the act which he performed daily in the theatre. When he went into a back or forward somersault on the stage, he had to keep his mind clear in order to enable him to judge distances to a hair's breadth—so that when he came out of the somersault, he could place his shots exactly where he wanted them.

Now, as he stumbled ahead, he sent his powerfully muscled body into a forward somersault. Morrison's shout was still ringing in his ears, and he knew that Morrison's service revolver was trained on him, and would probably begin to blast within another second. But he also knew that he must take this chance in order to escape—that if he did not make a break for freedom now, he'd never have another opportunity. So he kept going forward, into the somersault.

MORRISON yelled, *"Hey!"* and pulled the trigger of his revolver. The first shot went high, as it usually did when anyone fired at the Masked Marksman in motion. That trick somersault always fooled them. But Morrison was a crack shot, and he couldn't fail to miss on the second or third try. Ed hoped only that he would not be hit in a fatal spot. The hall was a long one, and there was ample time for Morrison to fire twice or three times more before Ed could reach the doorway at the far end. Of course, he could have drawn his own gun and killed the detective sergeant with a single shot. But that was a thing he would not allow himself to do.

He executed three forward somersaults which brought him up to the door, expecting each moment to hear the explosion of the detective's gun, and to feel the hot slug bury itself in his body. But no more shots came. He heard the sounds of a scuffle, and as he came to his feet he saw that Mary Griscomb had leaped upon Morrison, and had wrapped both arms around the detective's body, pinning his hands to his sides.

Morrison was struggling viciously, but Mary Griscomb held on with the grip of desperation, and she managed to gasp, "Keep going, Ed! I'll—hold—him!"

Ed's eyes were shining with admiration. "Nice going, Mary!" he called back, and leaped into the next room. He heard the two of them struggling in the hall as he raised one of the windows, and scrambled down the fire escape. In a moment he was out in the street, and was climbing into his taxicab.

"Uptown," he ordered. "Greymont Towers, on Fifty-seventh Street!"

Just as the cab completed its U turn and started north, Ed looked back out of the rear window, and saw Morrison come barging into the street, waving his gun. He shouted after the cab, but Ed's driver didn't see him, and turned the next corner, unconcernedly.

"Make it snappy," Ed told him. "I'm in a hurry. It's worth five dollars extra for me to get there in ten minutes."

"Right!" the driver said enthusiastically, and stepped on the gas.

The cabby thought he was just earning an easy five, but in reality he was pulling away from the squad car in which Morrison had started to give chase. Without knowing it, the driver was doing an excellent job of showing his heels to the law.

When they reached the Greymont Towers, Ed saw that the clock showed seven-sixty. With the extra five he had promised the driver, it made a total of twelve-sixty. He gave the man fifteen dollars, and told him to wait, with the flag up.

"Mister," said the cabby, "at this rate I'll wait for you till Hitler gets to America!"

Ed nodded, and hurried away from the cab, to the entrance of the Greymont Towers. It was impossible for him to put into so many words the reasons for coming here. Partly, it was cold logic, but to a greater extent it was a combination of hunch and character analysis. From what he had seen of Señor Felipe de San Toro, he judged that old Spanish rogue to be a man of great cleverness and of cool daring. He had seen how de San Toro had invented a story on the spur of the moment, in order to put Ed at a disadvantage. And he now had a glimmering of the depths of the conspiracy which he was sure de San Toro had fathered. Therefore, he was morally certain that the Spaniard would continue to act in a daring and original manner. If he was wrong, he would have to give up and take his medicine—primarily consisting of one whale of a beating at the hands of Morrison, down in the third-degree room.

Ed stepped into the beautiful stone entrance of the Greymont Towers, and almost bumped into a uniformed doorman.

"What floor for Georgette Vaughn?" Ed demanded.

He had expected that the doorman would be frigid, and refuse him admit-

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tance. Instead, the fellow nodded respectfully, and said, "Mrs, Vaughn occupies the penthouse, sir. Follow me to the penthouse elevator."

CHAPTER FIVE

Ed's Masterpiece

ED BEGAN to feel a little trickle of premonition as he followed the doorman across the lobby. The fellow was certainly acting out of character. He had never seen a flunky in so swanky an establishment who had not acted superciliously, and who offered to usher a visitor up without announcing him from the foyer.

"It's a self-service elevator, sir," the man told him, holding open the door of the cage. "Just go in, and press the penthouse button."

"Yeah?" said Ed. "Don't you have to announce me?"

"Oh, no, sir," the man smiled eagerly—almost too eagerly. "Mrs. Vaughn is expecting you."

"Expecting *me?* Do you know my name?"

"Why certainly, sir. You are Mr. Edward Race. I was told to send you right up if you arrived."

"You don't say!" Ed murmured.

The doorman seized the door, ready to swing it shut as soon as Ed entered the cage.

Ed ducked low, grasped the man's arm, and then pivotted on his heel. He got the fellow's arm over his shoulder, and heaved. The doorman went flying over Ed' head, and landed square in the cage, on his hands and knees. He uttered a shrill curse, and scrambled to his feet, with blood pouring from his nose. But Ed slammed the door shut, and nodded in satisfaction.

Upon stepping toward the cage, the door itself had been open, so that he had not been able to observe it. But he had seen a stout staple in the jamb—a staple which should never have been present in the door of an elevator. Now he saw that there was a stout padlock hanging by a hook on the door. He slipped the padlock over the staple on the doorjamb, and clamped it shut, just as the doorman inside hurled himself against the door.

"Lemme out!" the fellow yelled.

Ed grinned. "Just press the penthouse button," he called.

He waited, watching the indicator. Nothing happened. He nodded to himself. That elevator cage had been fixed so that it wouldn't work. The power must have been disconnected, so that it could neither rise nor drop. Once inside that cage, with the padlock securely fastened on the outside, Ed would have been a helpless prisoner until it suited his captors' fancy to release him—or turn him over to the custody of the police.

The doorman inside kept banging against the metal door, and Ed let him. He walked across the lobby to the main elevator. There was a little service closet alongside the elevator shaft, also with a padlock on it. Ed tried the lock, but it would not open. He took out one of his revolvers and fired a single shot into the staple. The explosion reverberated throughout the lobby, and must have sounded to the tenants in the building like the backfire of a huge truck. But the staple flew off, and the door of the closet swung open. Ed looked in, and grinned.

The real doorman of the Greymont Towers, and the elevator boy, were lying in there, trussed up, with gags stuffed into their mouths. They stared up at him in fright.

Ed smiled at them. "I'll just leave the door open, so you can get some air, boys," he said. "I haven't the time to untie you now. Wait'll I get down again."

He left them there, and stepped into the main elevator shaft. He slid the door shut, and pulled over the lever. This elevator worked all right, and the cage shot straight up to the penthouse.

Ed hunched his shoulders forward, so that the twin forty-fives in his holsters leaned out, ready to be grasped and drawn instantly. He opened the door and stepped out on to the roof.

The Vaughn penthouse was ablaze with light.

Ed hurried up the paved walk, between two small plots of smooth lawn, and stopped at the front door. The Venetian blinds were drawn all the way down, so he couldn't see inside the two windows facing on the lawn, but he could hear the sound of voices within, particularly the accented voice of Señor Felipe de San Toro. He couldn't distinguish what was being said, however.

Suddenly, above the sound of those voices, he heard a woman's scream. It wasn't a scream of pain or agony—but one of protest, perhaps of terror.

ED WAITED no longer. He put his hand on the knob, tried the door and found it locked. He turned his gun down on the lock, stepped back, and fired four times into it. The powerful sledgehammer blows of those forty-fives literally thrust the whole door backward tearing the tongue of the lock from the slot. Ed kicked the door wide, and sprang inside. He crossed the foyer in a single bound, and burst into the living room.

His hunch had been right! With the clever daring of the super crook, Seño. Felipe de San Toro y Moroja had chosen the home of Georgette Vaughn in which to hold her prisoner. Technically, no one could call it kidnaping to bring a captive to her own home!

Georgette Vaughn was in a straight-backed chair in the center of the room. The black-haired man who had dragged her into the fleeing car had hold of one of her arms, and Juan had hold of the other. Juan had his coat off, and a bandage around his shoulder, where Ed had shot him. Behind the chair stood Señor San Toro, with a gun in his hand. They had taken off Georgette's jacket and skirt and blouse, and she was clad only in a pink slip. San Toro had her jacket in his hand, and had been slitting it open with a kitchen knife, which he dropped at Ed's precipitate entrance, in favor of a gun.

The black-haired man, who was holding on to Georgette's left arm, reached into a shoulder holster for a gun, but San Toro's cold, calm voice interposed.

"It weel not be neecssary, Manuel. Have no fear. Señor Race weel not shoot us!"

Ed had both revolvers in his hands, one trained on Manuel, the other on Juan. By a quick, sure movement, he could have shot San Toro, too. But he saw what the wily Spaniard meant when he said there was nothing to fear. San Toro had placed the muzzle of his own gun at the back of Georgette Vaughn's neck, and was holding it with his finger curled around the trigger.

"Observe," he said dispassionately, "where I hold this gun, Señor Race. Eet ees true that you are what-you-call, *wizard* weeth those rai-volv-air. But observe too, that I can pull thees trigger weethout effort. Should you begin to shoot, the so-beautiful Madam Vaughn mus' die!"

"I see," Ed said slowly.

Georgette Vaughn had ceased struggling with the two men who held her. She was staring with wide eyes at Ed Race.

"Please—shoot!" she begged. "I—don't want to live any more!"

Ed studied the four of them with narrowed eyes. "These men have been blackmailing you?" he asked her.

"Yes. Manuel here, is a painter. He painted a portrait of me—just a head. I—never posed for the nude. But he painted another nude, and then put my face on it, and they put it up for sale at Lawrence's. They—they wanted me to pay fifty thousand dollars for it, because if Roger, my husband, had ever seen it, he'd surely have divorced me."

"I see," said Ed. "And then, when you refused to pay, along came the Señor San Toro, and told you he'd help you, eh? Told you he'd arrange it so you could go in there and steal the picture?"

"Yes, yes. That's right."

"But San Toro and these mugs just wanted you to get yourself in deeper. They had a detective stationed there, figuring he'd catch you, and then Lawrence could refuse to prosecute—provided you bought the picture you'd tried to steal!"

SAN TORO smiled thinly. "You 'ave thee vairy sharp mind, Señor Race. You 'ave guess' the plan. But now—you can guess that which weel 'appen to Madam Vaughn—onless we can find thee picture w'ich she 'ave taken. We search 'er clothes. Eet mus' be 'ere. Eef not—then eet mus' be in 'er purse—which you 'ave."

"But the picture is right there in the Lawrence Galleries," Ed said, keeping his guns high and level, waiting for the main chance. If ever San Toro should withdraw that muzzle from Georgette's neck for only a fraction of a second. . . .

San Toro laughed. "That picture which is now there, eet ees a duplicate, which my Manuel 'ave made. I replaced eet, while you argue' weeth those dumb detective Morrison. Thus, you 'ave been made to seem a liar!"

"Not bad," Ed said. "Now suppose you give Mrs. Vaughn her clothes again. We're all through playing games. I'm starting to shoot in exactly thirty seconds!"

San Toro shook his head. "Spanish gentlemen and American gentlemen do not endanger a ladee's life. You weel not shoot. On the contraree—you weel 'elp us to find thee painting!"

"Oh, what's the use!" Georgette Vaughn exclaimed . "I give up. It's in the lining of my skirt. I had a false pocket made, and slipped it in there. Now—you can have the portrait, and show it to my husband. I—I'm too tired to fight—"

Juan let go of her arm, and pounced on the skirt. He ripped the lining away, and drew out the small canvas.

"Oho! Now you shall pay—"

"Here goes!" Ed exclaimed, and fired.

San Toro had been so overcome by excitement that he had leaned forward past Georgette's chair, and his gun hand had pushed out forward just an inch or two. It was enough for Ed, and San Toro's wrist crumpled under the blast. Manuel and Juan stood frozen, not daring to move.

Suddenly, Georgette Vaughn uttered a cry. "Behind you—"

Ed heard a foot scrape at his back, and went into a split-second somersault just as a shot crashed from a doorway to the rear. He came to his feet, glimpsing the thin and emaciated face of Westley Lawrence in the doorway. Ed fired while he was himself still a blur of motion, and he didn't bother to look in Lawrence's direction any more, because he knew that he had aimed for the man's forehead, and he always hit exactly where he aimed.

He swung on one knee, his gun thundering in the room as Juan and Manuel began pumping shots at him.

There was a cool, hard smile on Ed's face as he triggered those two guns of his, shooting carefully, accurately, with no more emotion in his eyes than if he had been shooting at a row of candles on the stage of the Clyde Theatre. These men were not only thieves, they were murderers. They had cold-bloodedly machine-gunned a young cop. Ed felt like an executioner as he pumped lead into the hearts of those two men.

He straightened to his feet, with the walls still sending back the echoing reverberations of his thunderous gunfire.

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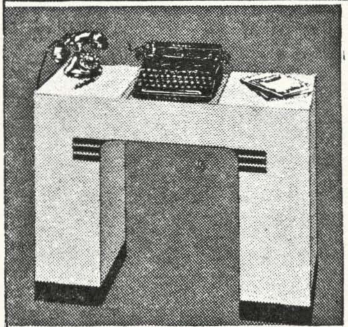

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Georgette Vaughn sprang to her feet, then reeled and would have fallen, if Ed hadn't caught her.

"Get your clothes on," he growled. "This is no time to faint or to have the heebie-jeebies. There'll be cops here in a minute."

HIS prophecy was pretty accurate as to time. It was only about ninety seconds before the front door banged open, and Detective Sergeant Morrison barged in, with Mary Griscomb at his side, and a couple of plainclothesmen at his back.

Ed tautened, but he relaxed when he saw that Morrison was putting his gun away instead of turning it on him.

Mary Griscomb smiled. She had hold of Morrison's elbow.

"I made him promise not to blow up till he could hear your story, Ed," she said. "I'm just holding on to his arm for insurance. He had to promise, or I wouldn't have told him your plan."

"Swell kid!" Ed praised.

He saw that Georgette Vaughn had got her clothes on, after a fashion, and let her tell her story to Morrison. The wounded San Toro stared impassively, while she talked, then he shrugged his shoulders.

"I 'ave lose!" he said. "Eet seem that I am too smart for mysel'!"

Detective Sergeant Morrison scratched his head, and looked shamefaced.

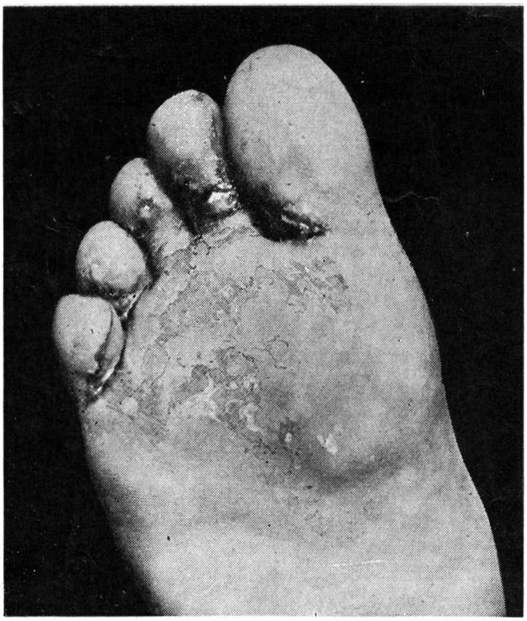
"Well, I'll be damned! You were telling the truth all the time, Race!" He stuck his hand out. "I apologize."

Ed nodded somberly, and took his hand. Then he turned to where Mary Griscomb had gone into a corner by herself. Now that the tension was over, she was sobbing quietly, with her head on the shoulder of Georgette Vaughn.

Morrison sighed. "Damned lousy—the life of a cop's wife!"

"Im thinking the same!" Ed Race said.

THE END



ITCHING FEET

ATHLETE'S FOOT

Send Coupon
Don't Pay Unless Relieved

According to the Government Health Bulletin No. E-28, at least 50% of the adult population of the United States are being attacked by the disease known as Athlete's Foot.

Usually the disease starts between the toes. Little watery blisters form, and the skin cracks and peels. After a while, the itching becomes intense and you feel as though you would like to scratch off all the skin.

BEWARE OF IT SPREADING

Often the disease travels all over the bottom of the feet. The soles of your feet become red and swollen. The skin also cracks and peels, and the itching becomes worse and worse.

Get relief from this disease as quickly as possible, because it is very contagious, and it may go to your hands or even to the under arm or crotch of the legs.

HERE'S HOW TO RELIEVE IT

The germ that causes the disease is known as Tinea Trichophyton. It buries itself deep in the tissues of the skin and is very hard to kill. A test made shows it takes 15 minutes of boiling to destroy the germ; whereas, upon contact, laboratory tests show, H. F. will kill the germ Tinea Trichophyton within 15 seconds.

H. F. was developed solely for the purpose of relieving Athlete's Foot. It is a liquid that penetrates and dries quickly. You just paint the affected parts. H. F. gently peels the skin which enables it to get to parasites that exist under the outer cuticle.

ITCHING OFTEN RELIEVED QUICKLY

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H. F. should leave the skin soft and smooth. You may marvel at the quick way it brings you relief. It costs you nothing to try; so if you are troubled with Athlete's Foot, why wait a day longer.

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Sign and mail the coupon, and a bottle of H. F. will be mailed you immediately. Don't send any money and don't pay the postman any money; don't pay anything any time unless H. F. is helping you. If it does help you, we know you will be glad to send us $1 for the bottle at the end of ten days. That's how much faith we have in H. F. Read, sign and mail the coupon today

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